

Emperors of the Text:  
change and cultural survival  
in the poetry of  
Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy.

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Brenda Allen

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To the memory  
of my husband, Ashley,  
of my parents, Amy and Jack,  
and of my sister, Yvonne.

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## Abstract

Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy have been, and are, regarded as a step ahead, as the voices that aid other citizens in their struggle to delineate the nature of their concerns about their society and the changes that must be coped with, internalised and incorporated into daily life. Because they are living in times of change, Larkin and Duffy are forced to find new ways to preserve their cultural identity that are not predicated on traditions that are dying or being superseded. The most startling of these changes, however, also affects Britain at the national and international level and in this thesis I examine the writing (including archival material) and life of these poets to argue that their efforts to deal with change may be seen as mirroring the stance of their nation, since in a nation with an elected government there must be, at some level, approval for and participation in, the *modus operandi* of that government. That these practices are imperialistic can come as no surprise, but ideas and practices of imperialism have changed. Thus it is that the older of the poets, Philip Larkin, harks back to the time of British Imperial glory, and the younger, Carol Ann Duffy, maintains a watching and speaking brief based on humanistic values of egalitarianism.

Larkin, although he purports to be liberal, especially in matters he regards as the merely conventional, fights against the very structures that could be helpful to him and prioritises the sustaining of a past that has no future except as memory and text. His refusal to conform to the social and canonical demands of his younger days, however,



ensures that he experiences ambivalence toward most of the structures he criticises as well as toward those he embraces. Nevertheless, his directionless rebellion paves the way for Carol Ann Duffy to move freely between the canonical and the vernacular, in terms of diction and subject matter. To this, Duffy has added her own determination to interrogate meaning, and to represent a culture that is changing by deconstructing and reconstructing canonical form in a way that Larkin did not.

The first two chapters of this thesis are about the importance of data and archive, especially the written word, to ideas of the British Empire, and Larkin's over-reliance on archive in his own life. The dysfunctional subjects of Duffy's poems, who display similar reliance on data and archive, are then discussed and related to her own, contrasting awareness of the difference between data and knowledge. The third chapter, in two parts, demonstrates that the imperialist practices of each poet are carried over into the world of personal relationships. Because of his more rigid attitudes, Larkin does not achieve transcendence in this sphere, but Duffy demonstrates that moments of rapture are possible. The last three chapters deal with the most prominent features of imperialism: religion, territory and war. The chapter on war, in particular, is based on archival material that Larkin wrote during or about war, that he saw fit to keep private until after his death; and the chapter also utilises Duffy's lesser-known early works. The conclusions of these chapters confirm those of the previous chapters.

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## Preface

New Zealanders have begun to interpret British art with a wide cultural view that takes into account their own post-colonial aspirations. But in order to develop a full awareness of what we have learned at the knee of Britannia, an understanding of imperialist power structures is necessary, as these underpin ideas and habits we must throw off in order to be secure in our separateness. This must surely be seminal to the ongoing well-being of a post-colonial identity, for unless we do so we may be susceptible to messages of imperialism that pervade art. This idea may seem obvious in terms of the increased status of art that is peculiarly ours and in terms of our developing bi-culturalism, but that it should be extended to our understanding of twentieth-century British poetry is less obvious, if only because it has been the custom to read poetry in the context of its own time and place without reference to the disjunction between that set of circumstances and those of the reader. Because of this, I have chosen to examine the work of two poets, each of whom has been acclaimed, while still relatively young, as the voice of the nation, to establish the terms of its imperialistic inheritance in order that I may read it with impunity.

## Introduction

Imperialism operates at the national and international levels, so that while nineteenth century explorers (on whom we may look back with an overview) are seen as imperialist, contemporary poets have not usually been interrogated as part of that now outdated political system. But it seems reasonable to assume that, in a country with an elected government, the power strategies of the nation will be mirrored in the social, cultural and inter-personal relationships of its citizens and that when the operation of the nation changes, citizens will have to make an effort to learn new ways of inter-relating and new ways of regarding themselves. One of the forums where this negotiation (or refusal to negotiate) can take place is in the art that purports to be predicated in the experience of the writer/citizen and those in the community who are observed by these writers.<sup>1</sup>

But imperialism has changed. In the course of the twentieth century, Britain has gone from enjoying a position as the hub of the world's most powerful and respected Empire, to a rather less secure and much less powerful position as a sometimes unwilling and unappreciated member of the EEC. Even as the twentieth century draws to a close, there is resistance to metric measurements and the Eurodollar and this, in part, demonstrates that there are some Britons who still feel the need to cling to the signs of authority which have acted as tokens of imperial power throughout the Empire and the Commonwealth. For the British, then, these signs are invested with cultural capital that is not easily replaced and may represent stability in a time when life has been characterised by a range of changes. Not only do we now have a computer age, but the intellectual climate has changed; the growth

of multi-culturalism in Britain has changed the semantic content of the very term “British”; and the Scots and the Welsh now have more say in the running of their respective parts of Britain. In a sense, the periphery has come to the metropolis, destabilising that which made the nation ‘great’. This means that not only must the former colonial populations seek decolonising strategies, but that the British themselves will have to go through a similar process of shifting their centre of identification onto that which is predictable and under their control.

Some might say that Britain is no longer imperialistic. But the fact that imperialism has changed to accommodate modern life is demonstrated by America, an imperialistic nation that watches more than it occupies, but which steps in to enforce its values outside its own borders. This allows the privileging of the status quo of one nation over that of another, although it seems less exploitative, particularly as the overt aim is to preserve peace and engender tolerance. But for Britain, the borders have come to town, both through the shrinking of the Empire and through the increased multi-cultural nature of British society. Citizens must negotiate to keep the peace in their own back yard. Somehow they must learn to withdraw their cultural capital from the imperialist banks, and reinvest it, perhaps in themselves. These days, it is possible to see, in contemporary British poetry, the kind of watching that at least attempts an understanding of the observed, similar to that commonly associated with American imperialism.

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Between them, Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy span most of the twentieth century, because although he was not born until 1922, Larkin began writing early

and the imprint of the first half of the century is on his work. This is traceable through the influence of his parents, his conservative education and his own conservatism that causes him to locate his centre firmly in the past, so that the present is peripheral, elusive, and even foreign. The identity he protects is that of the Englishman who stays at home, enjoying the fruits of empire without having to face up to the practicalities. At the time of his death in 1985, when Larkin had stopped writing, perhaps because he had nothing more to say, Duffy was publishing her first volume of youthful poems, demonstrating an identity that rests more on a stable self that can negotiate change than on a need to preserve the past.

Their differences are obvious: not only are they born into different historical, social, intellectual and political climates, but while Larkin was born in England, a male of the middle class, Duffy was born in Scotland, a female of the working class -- a female who has come to realise that she is gay. Nevertheless, these two poets have a great deal more in common than might at first be realised: each began reading voraciously and writing at an early age; each has written a body of work that is diverse enough to inform the reader of the changing social and historical atmosphere of their society as well as to allow glimpses into the ways in which their local contexts are related to the national and international contexts; and each purports to write from a body of experience. Of course, for each, that experience is British.

While I do not mean to suggest that Britishness does not admit diversity, that they seem similar relates, no doubt, to the fact that Britishness is no longer seen (as it was throughout the empire) as encompassing all points of view that are worth having. From the outsider position, it seems that the older view is predicated on spurious assumptions that privileged the very culture that is allowed to be its own

judge. As Roman Catholicism and Methodism (for example) may seem poles apart to a member of either sect, a person of non-Christian belief may regard their similarities as more important than their differences, if neither is broad enough to offer a comfort zone to the non-Christian outsider. As with the varying dogmas of Christianity, Larkin and Duffy also have differences that indicate a solidarity: while Larkin laboured to return himself and his nation to former times, Duffy labours to facilitate her own and her nation's movement into a new century. But in terms of the changing nature of imperialism, both use strategies that ape the political system that brought their nation 'glory'.

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The British Empire has often been described as a paper empire, because of its use of the written word to effect control at a distance in ways that kept expenses low and profits high by ensuring that a minimum of military force was required. The ways in which Larkin and Duffy treat archival material are, therefore, likely to be most revealing in terms of their use of imperialist structures, and this is the subject of the first two chapters. Larkin is especially bound up with the idea that text offers control, to the extent that he treats people around him as if they had some of the same qualities as texts, and as if he is their librarian, while avoiding having his own life written about by others. He seeks a geopolitical domain where correct answers may be found, and his questioning of his own findings are mere lip-service: statements made to absolve himself from the responsibility of demonstrating he is right. Reduction of people to text is not a strategy that Duffy uses, but she has observed it in others, so that the subjects of her poems are sometimes remarkably

Larkin-like because they do not know that text can capture data only in a way that robs it of a context through which it might be converted to knowledge.

The search for right answers is carried over into the realm of personal relationships, and the third chapter, in two parts, deals with the inter-personal strategies of Larkin and Duffy respectively. Clearly, if Larkin is to continue to play the part of the authoritative Englishman, then those around him must be made somehow subservient. He takes an authoritative position, textualising relationships in ways that increase his control quotient, but these representations are positive only when the chance that he will be required to reciprocate or make a commitment seems remote. Duffy, on the other hand, uses text as a way into a relationship. Unlike Larkin, her representations combine with other aspects of life, such as the kinetic and the semiotic, to provide a door to an intimacy that, unlike Larkin's loves lost, does not imply forever. Failure to step away from the text to explore the possibilities for intimacy leads to lost opportunity and/or dysfunction.

In chapter four, we see that these poets' views on and uses of religion are also at variance. Larkin is much more comfortable with his atheism than Duffy is with her criticism of the Church. The more Larkin writes in a vein that makes it possible to read him as religious, the less Christian belief he displays, while Duffy lambastes the Church -- its authority, its promises, its ritual and its teachings -- showing that she cares very much about God and, perhaps, about salvation. For her, religion and the individual are closely linked, but for Larkin it is Church and State that are interchangeable, each evoking the sense of belonging that, for him, encapsulates a superior kind of Englishness.

That British Imperialism survived so long and so well with a largely paper foundation demonstrates that writing people and the territory they occupy as one and



the same is an effective way of suppressing the voice of the oppressed. Chapter five is about the way both poets use maps, charts and signage, which also wield authority by carrying meaning. The ways in which Larkin and Duffy articulate their representations of place and the ways in which they populate their versions mirrors the imperialism of their respective times. Again, Larkin's idea of the English as representing the highest form of civilisation causes him to obliterate those subject to his gaze by making them, in the Lacanian sense, his mirror. Duffy, on the other hand, realises that text can be useful, but that it is not, in itself, authoritative, so that her subjects are allowed a voice that retains something of their own identity.

The most extremely dysfunctional relationships, at the national or international level, must surely be those which result in war, and this is explored in the last chapter. Neither poet is prepared literally to go to war, but both, in a sense, wage a war of words, and they do write about war. But Duffy seems never to endorse violence, because she regards war as the extreme end of a scale that begins with raised voices and a smack. Larkin abhors war in some contexts, but is upset that England seems less civilised when peace-keeping troops are withdrawn for lack of funds, and he separates war from other kinds of violence. Larkin expects to live by the text and die by the text. His writing is his immortality, his castle (a textual edifice that is founded on archive), the place where he is king, and his legacy is a literary red carpet that enhances Duffy's ability to speak to the nation that has recognised, in each of them, its own voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course this is not a totally new idea - Margaret Atwood, for instance, has suggested that the overarching idea under which one may examine British literature is feudalism. This may well be true for the older works, but it seems to me that imperialism and empire are the foundations (or the result) of the idea of British superiority that has underpinned British, and especially English, identity in the twentieth century.

## Chapter 1

### The Cata-tomes: Archive and Imperialism

Empire was all around us, celebrated on our biscuit tins, chronicled on our cigarette cards, part of the fabric of our lives. We were all imperialist then. (John Julius Norwich, speaking of the 1930s)<sup>1</sup>

In this examination of Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy as emperor-like in their own lives and texts, it makes sense to begin with an analysis of the ways in which they treat data and knowledge, because, traditionally, these have been conflated with archive, which has itself been a foundation stone of Empire.<sup>2</sup> The British Empire has long been supported by the idea that greatness is associated with the empires of classical times, and this has been underpinned by collections of myth (such as *The Golden Bough* and *Tales of the Arabian Nights*).<sup>3</sup> Until recently, the archive of the British Empire has consisted largely of data inscribed as language, stored as text and regarded as powerful even before its conversion to knowledge. Attitudes to knowledge (and to archive), however, have changed, and are changing;<sup>4</sup> but although the boundaries and relationships between data and knowledge and their component parts are no longer invisible, they remain blurred. In their writing Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy also blur the boundaries, especially those between knowledge and text, and between real life and text.

By amassing their own archive of works, Larkin and Duffy seek authority to comment on and to their changing society, to record what they see (as the textual records of empire have done), and to build for themselves a stable site for the investment of cultural self-identity where a measure of control over the immediate social environment is possible. Because the environment is characterised by change the main function of this archive is to negotiate a comfort zone where responses to change can occur. These responses can be characterised as ‘open door’, that is, open to outside influences and negotiation, with possibilities for making changes through

increased self-knowledge; or as ‘isolationist’ in policy, aiming to avoid outside influences in order to preserve the *status quo*. But the changes that Larkin and Duffy have had to deal with differ, and since one of the changes concerns the ways in which data and knowledge are regarded and treated,<sup>5</sup> it is logical to expect that their respective strategies and responses for dealing with change would also differ.<sup>6</sup>

The intellectual change, in turn, is linked to a change in the imperial status and structure of Britain, the nation within which Larkin and Duffy are culturally situated. For instance, in 1930, when Philip Larkin was at primary school, it seemed obvious that Britain was a great power: but by 1964 (which, Larkin says, was too late for him), when Carol Ann Duffy was at primary school, the majority of its eighty or so colonies had left the Empire. Therefore, in order to give a background to discussion on the mind-sets of these two poets, first it will be necessary to summarise some of the differences in the intellectual climates they inherited and to place these in an overall twentieth-century context by delineating the changing significance of archive in relation to empire.

Traditionally, empires have been supported and perpetuated by textual reserves such as chronicles, histories, edicts, myths and stories of military glory, and it can be no coincidence that attitudes to archive have changed as attitudes to empire have changed. In the modern world, however, archive has come to mean much more than the authority of any specific empire, because it is seen to function as a repository for knowledge, although until the second half of the twentieth century this ‘knowledge’ may well have consisted of what might now be regarded as *ad hoc* collections of data. In his book *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, Thomas Richards notes that in the Victorian period data collection throughout the Empire was regarded as a substitute for the “exact civil control” that was “possible in England,” and he goes so far as to say that the British Empire became “a paper empire: an empire built on a series of flimsy pretexts that were always becoming texts.”<sup>7</sup> That British imperialism is closely associated with the spread of the English language is obvious, and it can be no coincidence that it was in

1915, at “the first signs of the crumbling of the empire the Society of Pure English was formed”, its stated aim the protection of the language from the influence of colonial contact.<sup>8</sup> America was the first and only colony lost by the British, and because American English, seen by the British as a corruption of the real thing, had long been perceived as a threat to ‘Pure English’, it seems that loss of colonial territory carried a threat of loss of authority for the English language.

Belief in the power of official information and the authority of the correctly written or spoken word persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century, along with another belief on which this one depended -- that a “utopian space of comprehensive knowledge” actually existed: that there was “a geopolitical domain” where the “nerve centre of all possible knowledge” might be located if only enough data could be amassed. This would be the “library of all libraries, and the museum of all museums.”<sup>9</sup> A gradual loss of faith in these ideas was slowed, or even temporarily reversed, during the Second World War, by the need for the State to be credited with the power to know and act for the best. As in the days of imperial expansion, at this time information was seen as a military tool that could control, and be controlled. That this was confusing in the extreme is evident from the fact that during the Second World War, Allied High Command (where major strategic decisions were made) went so far as to introduce an element of the paranormal into their procedures for interpreting the vast amounts of information they collected, as a last resort to seeking a “unity of knowledge”. Richards asserts that

June 1944 .... was a time of extraordinary epistemological density, when the daily routine of observation and counter-observation that occupied military intelligence on both sides of the English Channel pivoted on the divination of minutiae...  
As D-Day approached, every feature of the phenomenal world was interrogated as a sign of the armies to come.<sup>10</sup>

space

Clearly, the effect must have been to substitute one arbitrary ‘system’ of information processing for another that was equally arbitrary in operation. This indicates that there was a desperately felt need for an overarching deductive system, and that this ‘need to know’ what, in fact, was unknowable, overcame commonsense.

Thus, until after the war, the power of the imperial archive as an imagined centre of all knowledge continued to be attributed to the State, in spite of the growing awareness, after 1930, that a state monopoly on information could also be harmful.<sup>11</sup> This realisation co-existed with and was disguised by the increase in state control during the Second World War. People had little choice but to accept official announcements and decisions, and were forced into a situation where they were compelled to attribute power to the word, even when their own experience was contrary to what was being said. Writing in 1942, Sydney Larkin records that while on a train he listened to a small child asking his mother “innumerable fast questions about everything imaginable”, and that the child’s mother replied to many of the ‘why’ questions with “‘Because there is a war on’”.<sup>12</sup> In other words, this mother was forced to present a justification as if it were an explanation. Thus, in every-day life, civilians were compelled to rely on a ‘belief’ in officialdom, for, if that failed, a need to question the infallibility of those with the authority to ‘know’ (and with the power to make decisions) would arise.

Larkin repeatedly exhibits this kind of concern, commenting in his letters and poems on matters such as censorship and propaganda. While at Oxford, he says that “The same columns that bless us today, tomorrow may / Sneer that we ‘swallowed the Press-barons’ bait / It happened last time”:<sup>13</sup> and although he does not fully explore the idea, his attitudes imply that not only does the State fail to extract perfect answers from its data, but that it is not to be trusted to use information in ways that support the best interests of ordinary citizens (a wider-ranging discussion of Larkin’s war-time writings and attitudes appears in chapter six).

When the Second World War began, then, it had already become apparent that during the First World War the British State had not always acted wisely or in the interests of its citizens. Officialdom had not only withheld information from people who were directly affected, but the information they did release was sometimes intentionally misleading. Clearly, in hindsight, the “Press-barons” were the beneficiaries of both the nation’s thirst for information and the government’s use of

the press for the dissemination of propaganda (war-time dis-information is also discussed more fully in chapter six). This realisation in relation to the First World War exposed the State as flawed in its patriarchal processes and less than omnipotent: the Second World War made it obvious that in a State involved in total war (that is, not confined to a specific arena or battlefield) everyone is at risk.<sup>14</sup> In this kind of war, the military, as representatives of the State, are unable to protect civilians or guarantee their safety, even in their own homes,<sup>15</sup> in spite of assurances that the ruling bodies act for the overall good. This was quite literally ‘brought home’ to Larkin with the bombing of Coventry and the evacuation of his family. Nevertheless, he baulked at moving openly to the positive conclusion that the State sees citizens as expendable; that it will act to preserve itself at all costs; and therefore, that it is not all-knowing, not all-powerful, and not to be trusted.

After the Second World War the British turned away from the State as a repository of the power associated with information but also ceased to entertain the idea of magic and the paranormal as a path to unity of knowledge. Some of the epistemological paradigms used for strategic planning during the war must have taken on a light similar to that of ghost stories that seemed credible in the dark, but that in the light of day seem little short of shameful. The idea that there is a centre of knowledge that would give the key to knowing all remained current, however, and there was a shift in perception so that power was attributed to such things as technology, language, and the structure of the information itself.<sup>16</sup> If the realisation was new that raw data did not automatically equate to knowledge and power, it can be expected that public attitudes would change only gradually. “Upbringing and education implant a mindset [*sic*] that proves resistant to change”,<sup>17</sup> and even as late as the immediate post-war years the expectation that an abundance of data would directly ensure ‘right’ decisions persisted in the minds of many people.<sup>18</sup> This is a way of thinking that Larkin clung to throughout his life, and by the time he died in 1985 (which is also the year that Duffy published her first adult book of poetry), he was out of step with much of the rest of society, where there was a growing

realisation of the role of information systems in the conversion of data to knowledge, and of the conflicting 'knowledges' that arose by varying the information-processing system. By this time, identifying stored, unprocessed information as knowledge was seen as erroneous and old fashioned.

This suggests that although Duffy may have grown up in a household where officialdom was granted considerable authority (because her parents would have remembered the war), she would not have absorbed an unquestioning trust in the State or its representatives. Her grandfather was a labour supporter, a union man, and far from conservative; and she was born and lived her early childhood in Scotland -- where the British State has long been resented for what is seen as its belief in its own superiority, and its high-handed ways. Duffy seems to have become accustomed to comparing what was said to be with what she actually experienced, and attributing authority to the experience rather than to the word. This is only partly explained by her historical position,<sup>19</sup> but she certainly seems to have realised that she could deliberately change the way she thinks by learning to examine the logic and consistency of matters that had formerly been taken for granted. Larkin, on the other hand, continued to struggle with dichotomies and paradoxes, expending precious energy on adhering to contradictory precepts and mutually incompatible readings (and misreadings) of his own experience.

While Larkin's generation spent its efforts in search of the central *meaning* of data, Duffy's generation spends its seeking the ultimate *system* to accommodate data and turn it into knowledge. It is probably fair and accurate to say that this search continues. In his book *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED*, for instance, John Willinsky notes that his research has been made possible by the computer -- that all past material can be amassed and incorporated into a database which is electronically integrated and can be continually updated.<sup>20</sup> But there is a growing public perception that although the new sciences (such as computer research and management science) develop the information systems we have, and improve them by allowing greater storage, quicker retrieval, and more intricate cross-referencing,

these systems are not authoritative in themselves. The search for a geopolitical domain which functions as the nerve centre of all knowledge, like Utopia, is considered by many to be merely a pleasant fantasy. Nevertheless, the idea that there can be consistency between databases, and that this is desirable, persists.<sup>21</sup>

In the late Victorian atmosphere in which Philip Larkin grew up, however, there was a strong belief in 'right' answers, so that what was expected was conformity. It is not surprising, then, that his bid for freedom (at least in its initial stages) consisted of rebelling *against* the power of the *status quo*, without positing compromise or viable alternative. This is in line with the actions of other Movement poets: for instance, Larkin's implied 'against, against' is perhaps paralleled by Thom Gunn's clearly articulated but directionless 'toward, toward'. Gunn eventually moved away from Movement values, but Larkin has always been, and still is, hailed as the archangel of the Movement, the voice that is not so much "typical" as "*perfect*"<sup>22</sup> because he continued to capture the aura of negativity that is its hallmark. This negativity was no mere affectation on Larkin's part, and can be seen as an integral part of his life. His persistence in valuing the novel when he excelled as a poet, and his preoccupation with the impossible task of amassing and cataloguing the perfect and complete set of data, a quest that must fail, both reinforce the negativity. The obvious course open to him, then, is to rail against the need to conform, but in the end dutifully to carry out most of his social and filial obligations in much the same way that people were forced into doing during the war, when morale rested on the willingness of the people to accept the authority of the government, whether or not they agreed with or trusted its policies.<sup>23</sup>

Duffy, on the other hand, grew up in an era when women were achieving new status and asserting their autonomy by positive action, and she realises she can give voice to those who are usually silenced. Much of her poetry is in the language and voice of those who are not members of mainstream groups -- the Scots, women, immigrants, gays, the poor, the deranged -- and in this she takes her use of the vernacular beyond that of Larkin, whose most immediate contemporary appeal was



to young, white, middle-class men. Because she examines a variety of cultural and socio-economic standpoints, matters that absorbed Larkin (such as racism, social duty and mistrust of politics) take on a multiplicity of meaning for Duffy, and are constantly being redefined. Growing up after the war has not, in itself, ensured Duffy's ability to deal with multiplicity or offered her a social approval that has made change easy, however; and of course some individuals of Larkin's generation have also changed with the times. But Larkin's adult vernacular always embodies an Oxford accent, while Duffy speaks in a variety of Englishes. In fact, both poets have moved towards an identification with the dominant cultural group, at least in terms of voice and regional identification. Larkin was brought up in Coventry, and, no doubt, had a Midlands accent until his voice was remade in the Oxford mould during his treatment for a stammer.<sup>24</sup> Duffy was born in Scotland, and writes of cultivating an accent that would not stand out, after she moved to England.

Nevertheless, the fact that Larkin and Duffy grew up absorbing different epistemological attitudes is directly relevant to the fact that they tend to exhibit different behaviours, attitudes, and expectations. These differences in thinking would appear to have been reinforced by their respective educational experiences, especially in the University system. Duffy was at University in the 1970s, at a less traditionally conservative establishment than Larkin. Larkin, however, studied Literature in the 1940s, when only the test of time proved a work to be endowed with a literary quality, and, in the main, the contents of fictional works were regarded as artistic creations that transcended, rather than reflected, real life. In his biography of Larkin, Andrew Motion says that the Oxford course was "heavily biased towards philology, and ended with the writers of the 1820s".<sup>25</sup> By the standards of the 1960s and 1970s, then, his university study was extremely conservative and involved unquestioning acceptance of established ideas.

While at Oxford, Larkin bemoans the narrow nature of his education and the limitations placed on his artistic judgement by the set ideas that surround the English

literary canon, limiting criticism to an admiring analysis that relies on an acceptance of what the poet has to say. Of Dryden, he complains:

I very frequently want to lie down and vomit. Instead I read Dryden.... I'm definitely a romantic in art, if that means anything. This means I expect colour, idealism & mysticism, to a certain extent. Now Dryden hasn't got any of these qualities, says Buggery Dobrée [Bonamy Dobrée]. Instead he has 'complete mastery of his instrument'.... [But] What's the good of being able 'perfectly to express an idea' when one's ideas are all balls?

And of Caedmon he says:

If I'd composed a poem like that one I'd keep it jolly dark, my God I would. Ought to have been duly raspberried by all concerned.<sup>26</sup>

He rails against the hypocrisy of being forced to espouse a mainstream view:

You have to learn two things about each poet -- the 'wrong' attitude and the 'right' attitude. For instance, the 'wrong' attitude to Dryden is that he is a boring clod with no idea of poetry, and the 'right' one that he is a 'consummate stylist' with subtle, brilliant, *masculine*, etcetera etcetera. Irrespective of what *you personally feel* about Dryden these two attitudes must be *learnt*, so that you can refute one and bolster up the other. It just makes me *crap*.<sup>27</sup>

Larkin objects to the rigidity of the 'right' view, but posits only a 'wrong' one in opposition, showing that he has not realised that the real problem stems not from the set answers, but from their rigidity, and the absence of multiplicity that a range of viewpoints would offer. Without multiple viewpoints the possibilities for inquiry are limited because alternative hypotheses are never developed and tested.<sup>28</sup> But Larkin is not alone in his failure to realise this. Willinsky notes that the recent editors of the *OED* also failed to realise the full implications of multiplicity, because even though they acknowledge the unavoidability of omission, they continue to regard a comprehensive work that could account for all eventualities as achievable. Even the editors of the latest edition, he says, describe their work as "an accurate and comprehensive register of the whole vocabulary of English".<sup>29</sup> Larkin's lack of multiple viewpoints, then, in spite of its limitations, is an advance on the prevailing intellectual climate he found at Oxford and in line with that of his time and place.

It is in his writing and in the way he conducts his life, which he compartmentalises almost as though it were possible to keep different aspects entirely separate,<sup>30</sup> that Larkin's lack of multiplicity is evident. He behaves differently in different environments, and with different people, and does not encourage his friends to mix with each other: he often compares what is expected of him with what he wants to do, and compares what he expected with what he got, as though these things could be separated in some practical way from the indisputable fact that there were choices, and from the added value of hindsight. Although he feels differently at different times, for the most part the delineation of his ambivalences continues to take the form of clear-cut binary oppositions that increase his (often unacknowledged) dilemma, because they posit no alternative actions that might indicate compromise. Although the motivation for this kind of mind-set lies in the unwillingness to take the risks associated with change, the result is added stress, and the curtailment of potential for self-knowledge.

In contrast, Duffy is more holistic in her approach: she is positive where Larkin is negative, active where he is passive, and warm where Larkin tries to be detached. She attempts to develop, within herself, an information processing system that, because it invokes as many as possible of the human capacities, takes a multiple view of data, and cross-references information components in the process of their transition to knowledge. The functions of collection and preservation are retained, but retrieval may be facilitated by any number of approaches, enabling the exposure of what might otherwise remain merely implicit. Cross-referencing is given a higher priority than with Larkin, allowing (but not compelling) each new piece of information to be related to those already present. Unlike Larkin (and her librarian in "Model Village", discussed later in this chapter) who tries to separate art, reason and the empirical from personally felt emotion, Duffy actively retains emotion and the semiotic as part of her information-processing strategies. Thus, Duffy's stereotypes<sup>31</sup> remain fluid, and can be renegotiated with the arrival and examination of each new piece of data. (This fluidity is explored further in the next

chapter, in a comparison of the ways in which the two poets treat textual allusion, the semiotic, and their dissection of language.)

Unlike Larkin, Duffy has had a variety of employment, at least some of which has allowed her to exercise her artistic judgement without the need for any kind of specific data systems analysis.<sup>32</sup> It is not possible to link her poetry to aspects of her employment, or indeed to separate her poetry from her employment, in the same way as with Larkin. This is partly because of the time factor -- her working life is still in progress. Her poetry, however, provides an unflattering commentary on those who, like Larkin, have an overdeveloped faith in raw data coupled with faulty information-processing systems. There is evidence that she has at least an incipient awareness of the claims of competing epistemological systems, including that of the paranormal (for instance, in "The Magician's Assistant" in *William and the Ex-Prime Minister*, the invocation of magic has an effect that is unpredictable and outside the control of the supplicant). And although there is no reason to believe that Duffy is actually thinking of Larkin, the librarian in her poem "Model Village" (SM 21-2) could well be a member of the "Movement". The attitudes exhibited are negative and generally limiting. Everyday life has been rejected: the librarian has developed the double strategy of abdication from the real world, and usurpation in the textual world, in order to cope.

This seizing of imaginary power gives an aura of failure and withdrawal, and represents a move to a position that is not only anti-relationship, but close to what Rob Jackaman, talking of Kingsley Amis, has called "anti-humanity"<sup>33</sup> (only here it is not animals, but books, that are more satisfactory than people). Both Larkin and Duffy's librarian have views that invite the reader to draw parallels and intersections, and it will be convenient and productive first to examine the attitudes of Duffy's librarian to his working life, and then to examine Larkin's attitudes to his own. This will make available an overview (though, of course, not the only possible view) of Larkin's and Duffy's individual attitudes to archive and the power of

archive, and lead on to a discussion of the uses they make of archive and text in their poetry and in their lives.

In the library in Duffy's "Model Village",<sup>34</sup> the failure of the speaker to perceive a secure environment founded on community spirit and human relationships stems partly from a personal inability to accept diversity. Because the librarian cannot understand the "*plot*" of each and every mind, he feels that the individuals who make up any social or kinship group (with which identification might be made) are out of control. Social obligation also demands reciprocity, and (as Larkin has frequently noted) this is both demanding and frightening. Reciprocity implies that the individual in general society has a right to expect something from the librarian, and because (unlike texts) people are unpredictable, there is no telling what they may require or how much effort this might entail. Texts are socially undemanding, and, in a library, procedures concerning activities such as lending services, maintenance and cataloguing are all circumscribed by the librarian. The library environment, too, is organised, and the rules may be rigidly enforced, again, by the librarian. The written word rules not only on the shelves, but throughout, and the librarian is the only one permitted a voice. Even this is reduced to a whisper, "*Ssssh*", but a whisper that directs others as it falls loudly on near-silence, not a protesting voice crying to be heard above the clamour. As long as this librarian observes a core of etiquette associated with libraries generally, he can act as dictator. There is no competition or opposition, and there are no repercussions and no unwelcome social obligations.

Consequently, it is not to the people using the library that the librarian is indispensable, but to the books themselves. They are unable to think for themselves despite being chock-full of data, so that they believe what they are told, conforming to the demands of their leader like a well-disciplined regiment standing to attention. They do not examine the qualifications or methods of their leader, or speak on parade: and not only are they at ease with the consequent freedom from responsibility, but they are "*breathing calmly / on their still shelves*", exhibiting an

unnatural capacity for ‘inspiration’ and ‘expiration’. Perhaps, just by breathing the same air the books have breathed, the librarian can absorb the essence of their contents. The librarian perceives his power over the books as derived from the books themselves, mirroring the early twentieth-century attitude to the information these texts represent. Only rudimentary information processing systems are considered necessary, and the insecurity this engenders is revealed by the fact that it is the unthinking *books* that belong in the library and are unafraid. Like loyal subjects they do not question the difference in status or the good intentions of their monarch.

In contrast, the librarian is a (now indispensable) refugee from outside: an exile/colonist from a higher civilisation who, through his more highly developed intellectual abilities, has attained a position as a “*doctor on his rounds*”. His cures have secured his claim to a foreign throne. By claiming to “*know their cases*”, although the librarian’s analysis is faulty, his credibility is established. As a specialist the library monarch can “*doctor*” the facts simply by purporting to know more about the books and their insides than they themselves can know. This gives him a kind of god-like insight into the individual conditions of each text. In addition, within the confines of the library area, the data-“*doctor*” is widely travelled, and has an overview: a cultural and geographical perspective and a mobility that individual books do not have. Although the textual subjects may have opportunities to compare their leader and their library culture with other systems when they travel outside the library, they may only leave in the custody of an accredited tour guide/borrower, and with an approved exit-visa stipulating the length of time they may be absent. In turn, the travelling books become missionaries, explorers, ambassadors and consuls representing library country, spreading signs of library/empire throughout the outer world, and upholding the interest of their monarch, the librarian. Inside library country it is the librarian who has the overview, who knows not only the books’ individual “*cases*” but their bookcases,

and who gives the orders or grants leave of absence. As long as the books return from their travels the librarian's existence and authority are both upheld.

The librarian in Duffy's poem may or may not be mad, but it is certain that he exhibits poor thinking processes. He has appropriated the power of archive to the extent that he has almost succeeded in replacing the State itself with archive. This is a library/state where archive controls the relationship with the outside, and yet is controlled from the inside by the librarian. Autonomous people are superfluous because the books themselves make up the population of this State. The distance between the ordinary citizen and the State archive has been obliterated, and the archive/citizen is organised by the librarian, who represents the entire organising structure. The librarian has the home-territory mapped, and takes on an ability to be the seeing I/eye on behalf of the entire textual population. He keeps the books in line, while seeing to their well-being: a truly patriarchal imperialist commander, who tempers complete authority with a sense of responsibility to other (textual) members of the community, and is, therefore, authoritative as well as indispensable. All that is asked in return is instant and complete obedience and total conformity. Like a Napoleon or a Hitler, he has the undivided attention of his subjects, who are (at least for now) outwitted.

This librarian has been seduced by the illusion of security that the comfort and control of living with books can offer, and says, "*here I'm safe*". The idea that there might be revolt from within the library, or that books might defect, does not occur, and the danger referred to is not an attack by a stronger library, but an attack on the authority structure. To guard against attack, people are excluded. Although the librarian is human, and needs human company, he deals with this problem by convincing himself that books that can breathe are company enough. The transference of human characteristics (breathing, health) to books is then used to justify a transference of fictive qualities to people, so that a useful comparison of real/textual humanity is not possible. Difference is important, but its nature is never analysed. Inside the library the librarian presides over a Shangri-la (a master race?),

populated by dedicated “*Tomes*” that “*do no harm*” and behave predictably. “*Outside*”, however, “*is chaos, / [and] lives with no sense of plot*” which are dangerous because they are unpredictable and cannot be controlled.

Desire for safety and, perhaps, for the power of control has led the librarian to regard the books in the library as more real than “*the books in everyone’s head*” that are “*stranger*” than fiction and outside his jurisdiction. People do not have to be taken seriously, firstly because they are all outsiders and different, but especially because what they have in their heads is not seen as real, but as wild, changeable, uncivilised fiction. This is totally unacceptable in a land where, no matter how strange the citizen’s stories become, they are contained within texts that are real because they can be arranged and ranked, by the librarian, alphabetically and by subject or genre. Books that stray are sent home (like Joseph and Mary) during the annual ‘census’. Categorisation is not problematic because, unlike people, the books contain complex emotion only within a “*sense of plot*”, and the semiotic disappears down the gaps between the lines. Thus the librarian is able to feign rationality and a semblance of objectivity by dissociating himself from emotion, and ensuring that his life is plotted on an apparently predictable course. Categories such as ‘happy’ or ‘sad’ fall outside the scope of library organisation; and even when they contain emotional turmoil, texts, like dutiful subjects, remain self-controlled and loyal to the librarian, mirroring back his own omnipotence, as required. Excluding emotion allows the categorisation process to reinforce the established practice of delineating data as exalted, and seems to render a decoding superfluous. In this library, the priority is to maintain order in a bid to eliminate risk and challenge to the authority of the librarian.

Larkin demonstrates similarities with the librarian in “Model Village”, in that he seeks to eliminate risk, without which new knowledge cannot be gained.<sup>35</sup> Minimising risk, however, provides a powerful motivation to action, and it was fear of where, and to what kind of employment, the manpower office might send him, that motivated Larkin to apply for a library job in the first place. He had already



been turned down for other employment where (in the interview) he presented himself as uninterested in the job, and that he landed this position is directly related to his relatively positive attitude. He had long sought comfort in librarian-like activities, and periodically, since his middle childhood years, he had collected and bound his own works into volumes, perhaps seeking a kind of authority not usually available to a child.<sup>36</sup> In a way, by taking on the librarianship, he was acting out some of his childhood pastimes in the adult world, and it might be expected that he would have a positive attitude to libraries. But Larkin does not admit enjoying his work until much later in life. In 1944, when he commenced employment in the Library at Wellington, he commented on the need to work, observing that unpleasant events, such as paid employment, could be worthwhile only if they were to provide material for writing about at a later time:

You see, my trouble is that I simply can't understand anybody doing anything but write, paint, compose music - I can understand their doing things as a means to these ends, but I can't see what a man is up to who is satisfied to follow a profession in the normal way.<sup>37</sup>

At this time, then, Larkin does not see himself as “follow[ing] a profession”, but as serving some sort of penance, or mechanical activity that would allow him to write, and he relates this in some way to the normality of the less artistically talented. Prior to his move into the library, Motion says, “he didn't have much affection for libraries.... they were contaminated by their connection with ‘literature’ and with rules.”<sup>38</sup> Since Larkin wrote some very well-ordered poetry himself, it is clear that he did not object to literature or rules *per se*, but to the kind of narrow academic view he encountered at Oxford. Certainly, dislike of rules did not hamper him in his job: as a librarian he is almost legendary for his length and quality of service, and for his innovative, well-organised work. In fact, part of the original attraction of the position was the orderliness of library procedures.<sup>39</sup>

As time went on Larkin changed his opinion of libraries. In 1972 he wrote of “plugging on with dear old librarianship” as if it were a friend, or a spouse,<sup>40</sup> and “looking back” from the distance of 1979, he said that “Librarianship suits me”

going so far as to say his choice of employment was “inspired” (through breathing the same air as so many books in his father’s library at home, perhaps?). His opinion of the effect of ordinary work on poets was also transformed by this time, and he says, forgetfully, “I’ve always thought that a regular job was no bad thing for a poet.”<sup>41</sup> His complaints about life, his fear of death, and the depression and angst that were part of his writer’s block in his later years, do not seem to be directly connected in his mind with his job, and this is possibly because, like the mad librarian, the large amount of control he gained over both his working life and the systems that governed the conditions under which he worked seduced him into feeling that his whole life was, as far as is possible, under control. Philip Larkin gained a greater degree of autonomy in his working life than most people are able to do: at Wellington and at Hull, although he was answerable to a higher authority, he took charge of his own work, and did not have anyone looking over his shoulder or circumscribing the scope of his innovations. In the corona of his library position at Hull, Larkin served on high-powered committees that enabled him to have his say on matters such as selection and publication of literature, library architecture and high level administrative procedures, so that in a very real sense, he was a powerful man.<sup>42</sup> All of these activities, however, were connected in some way to the concept of an archive -- the acquisition, organisation, preservation, dissemination and easy retrieval of records, art and information: data in the form of material matter, are all central to the functioning of a library.

Much of Larkin’s power and influence, and most of his working life, was spent administering what can, in modern technological terms, be described as a huge and necessarily clumsy database. As with the administration of the British Empire, in the formation and maintenance of a database such as a library, the collection of data becomes a legitimate activity in its own right. This feeds the illusion that facts are intrinsically valuable and that a complete set of data holds a truth that allows its possessor to make the ‘right’, or at least the best possible, decisions. But any decision requires the divination of meaning and relevance of available facts as well

as the exercise of judgement. Because all possible outcomes cannot be known or their desirability assessed, this is partly an intuitive process, and is quite separate from the specific data it manipulates. Elevating the importance of data-gathering overshadows the ideas that the value of information is more closely connected with its utilisation, and that it is impossible to separate neutral data from individually and culturally embedded subjectivity.

Thus a neutral or complete set of data is very difficult to define and impossible to find. Databases can, however, appear complete when they are large and contain recent information. They can seem neutral if they contain facts in isolation from moral, emotional or consequential factors, and if reason and logic are held to be detached from emotion and are privileged as empirical, objective, and infallible. The outcome of such a system seems justified in that it is the 'best' possible. However, since it is beyond the human brain to design a system that will extract only 'right' conclusions, there is a degree of arbitrariness to some of the choices that must be made, making the intuitive aspect inescapable, and the seeming neutrality of data an illusion.

Duffy writes about the dysfunction that results from such faith in data, and in her poem "The Captain of the 1964 *Top of the Form* Team" (MT 7), "The Captain" reveals that in the 1960s it was still possible to go through the school system without learning that data is only valuable as knowledge when it is organised within a system of thought. When the poem begins, he is reciting from memory a list of cultural data relating to his own heyday -- he cites popular music, school, dating, and personal hygiene. He goes on to list geographical and historical facts, and crowns them with his own achievement as "a cowboy" with his trusty "bike", recalling that together they successfully negotiated "Dyke Hill, / no hands" at great speed. In class it is the "white sleeve / of my shirt" that "saluted again and again" as he volunteered for educational service, accepting mission after mission, and always bringing back the data. But now this "cowboy" lives in an era when data-bounties are not offered for simple naming, and all he can do is preserve what he has

committed to memory. He is a data-gatherer, but unlike a hunter-gatherer, he does not digest his 'finds'. Instead he preserves their original state in his mind and on paper in a bid to recapture the glory that the school system has inappropriately taught him to expect, and which, chronologically at least, he has outgrown.

Nevertheless, naming is an important part of classification and stereotyping. It allows items of data to be communicated; it apes processes valued as scientific discovery; and it demonstrates a kind of possession of both data and territory. Duffy's primitive data-gatherer invokes this connection when he seeks to defuse the derision of his family by calling on Rhodesia and the British pound (with its subgroup, the florin) seeking a sense of belonging by naming authoritative signs of home that also represent power throughout the empire.<sup>43</sup> And "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" (*TOC* 8), naming affords temporary possession of far off lands, "Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân." Duffy outlines the Eurocentric nature of the school syllabus in "The Good Teachers" (*MT* 16). French language and the geography of exotic places like "Dar es Salaam" and "Kilimanjaro" are included, but cultural difference does not figure. Used in this way, these names are inscribed with a British cultural value, and give the same illusion of power as calling on signs of empire. In the "Comprehensive" (*SFN* 8) school, cultural difference cannot be ignored, but is boiled down to the narrowest of stereotypes -- like us (good), and not like us (not good). In "Head of English" (*SFN* 12) the teacher, after arranging for a poetry reading, treats the poet like an exhibit and the poetry like a commodity to be bought and sold. She prepares her class by telling them that "not all poems, / sadly, rhyme these days," and urges the pupils to "feel free to raise some questions. / After all, we're paying forty pounds." Not only does she imply that unrhymed poetry is not worth the money, but makes it clear that she prefers Kipling, or her own writing. She has chosen an imperialist poet in Kipling, and obviously, since she does not value poetry she has not already read, memory is the most important element in her system of appreciation. Her choice of poet parallels the Captain's invocation of the pound and Rhodesia, implying a devaluation of cultural difference and a desire to

identify herself with the powerful, old mainstream of Imperial Britain. In the light of such artistic conservatism, which is indistinguishable from philistinism, it is not surprising to the reader that this teacher tries to elevate his/herself by the use of once lofty, but now hackneyed, phrases; and to restrict the clapping ("Not too loud") so that decorum triumphs over enthusiasm. New learning -- especially that of which the teacher disapproves -- is nothing to get excited about.

In "The Dark School",<sup>44</sup> a recently published poem, the powers of memory and of naming fail. Even the classics, in the form of "Latin verbs", do not lighten this literal darkness but "[go] out on the board" as night replaces day. The tenuous nature of the power of naming is exposed, for it is not memory alone that gives access to knowledge. The lessons have been "learn[ed] well", and "the black paintings in their burnt frames ... the lightless speeches ... the bleak equations" have all been committed to memory. "Above the glass roof of the chemistry lab", however, "the insolent, truant stars squander their light", showing that to shine in the dark requires a *system* which not only stores light, but organises it as well. Rote learning is a storehouse, but it does not offer a system, and is not a skill to be taken outside the classroom -- or at least not at night, because darkness quickly exhausts this kind of learning by converting it to a highly selective kind of ignorance.

In "Litany" (MT 9), the "soundtrack" fails because the women are socially unable to pronounce some names. They use catalogues to select utilitarian items of artificial substance such as "*pyrex*" and "*candlewick*". In a way, the use of ready-made catalogues -- textual and verbal -- functions to limit the need for language by excluding imagination and by defining (and thus limiting) the choices. This keeps communication on well worn-paths, and avoids the need to acknowledge matters such as "cancer, or sex, or debts". Some words that are not acceptable in spoken form may be acceptable fractured and spelt out, but "certainly not leukaemia". This is a word "which no one could spell", and so cannot be uttered: even the strategy of naming the component letters, rather than the word itself, fails. A small rebellious child, not yet fully socialised into the ways of adult denial, challenges this verbal

environment when she reveals that “*A boy in the playground,... told [her] / to fuck off*”. In the instant between her utterance and punishment, she experiences “a thrilled, malicious pause” on her tongue. The forbidden word has produced an electrifying effect on the hearers, temporarily allowing the child to adopt the powerful, aggressive male position herself, and the implication that the hearers enjoy their own aural assault, that they want to be shocked, is obvious. ‘Bad’ language is power. The use of forbidden words provokes a reaction that ‘good’ words or behaviour do not.

Larkin, too, has noted the power of forbidden words. Stephen Burt has argued that his use of four-letter words is not only a bid to dissociate himself from authority figures, and to align himself with others, but also a bid to capture what is lost in the translation of art into language: a bid to say the unsayable.<sup>45</sup> If swearing is seen as a way of saying, or conveying to a hearer, the unsayable, then it is closely allied to the semiotic, and could indicate an acknowledgment of the need for reintegration of emotion and intellect in the realm of art, and in the realm of personal existence -- and this can be seen as a yearning for stereotypes (‘me’ and ‘not me’) that will afford a stable self-definition.

Using language that is not always socially acceptable is an important part of Larkin’s strategy for classification and compartmentalisation. In April 1946, when he writes of his intention to take a correspondence course in library classification, he has already described an incident the previous year where he and a friend spent time naming actions that are not usually topics of conversation:

Bruce and I ran so far out of conversation that we were reduced to compiling a list of sexual perversions on the back of an envelope, and planning to write a little library of short novels, one around each. It was the pleasantest kind of castle-building ...<sup>46</sup>

In the same letter, Larkin goes on to relate that this exercise included discussion of the specific meanings of the individual terms, and that “It was interesting to see what was left out at the end.”<sup>47</sup> This shows a realisation that classification, because it demands boundaries, will cause some aspects of related matters to be “left out”, but as with his criticism of Oxford one-eyedness (in his comments on Dryden and

Caedmon quoted earlier), there is little or no sign of any examination of the problems that are inherent in the selection process. The power of the words themselves overshadows the faults in the system, and the problem is accepted, and dismissed.

In the library the added value that ‘bad’ language gives is not available, and categorical “castle-building” is hard work. Larkin becomes “BLOODY TIRED” of “cataloguing ROTTEN OLD BOOKS”<sup>48</sup> very early in his career. He finds the activity repetitious and the system clumsy. Perhaps his frustration contributes to his acceptance of the idea that the result will enable “anybody coming to the catalogue with even the vaguest ideas abeigh[t] *[sic]* it ... [to] eventually find it.” This assessment confirms his belief that his own reliance on the process is appropriate. His own catalogue, and the harmful consequences of fragmenting information by divorcing it from its associated emotions, can be seen throughout his poetry.

In his poem “Going” (*CP* 3),<sup>49</sup> completed in 1946 when Larkin had been working in a library for a little over two years, he can be seen struggling to revise his cognitive catalogue. He puzzles over “an evening coming in/ Across the fields,” that although it seems “Silken” when viewed from afar, does not conform because it “lights no lamps” and “brings no comfort.” The speaker is trying to identify this “evening” that lacks the defining qualities of light and comfort, and, confounded by the deprivation of the sense of touch and the use of kinetic and muscular memory, asks if there is something “under my hands, / that I cannot feel?” Whatever it is, Larkin notes that it “loads [his] hands down”, depriving him of sense and dexterity, almost as if he were having a bad dream where the relationship between physical effort and motor movement is disturbed. This devaluing of the senses forces the observer to place more emphasis on reason; but the bid to classify, an attempt to locate an all-organising, logical process that will overcome the need to feel, is confused by conflicting data so that it is not logic, but a kind of surreal illogic that is adopted as the organising factor.

Is it the evening that is different, then, or is the poet so handicapped by his loss of physical senses that he cannot make a positive identification? This evening is “one never seen before,” but that is typical, and promotes identification of this phenomenon as evening at least as much as it casts doubt. Sight alone is not enough to classify something that is in darkness, and it is impossible to tell whether the poet gains “no comfort” because the unusual texture of the evening makes it difficult to classify, or because his inability to feel its silken touch denotes a loss of holistic sensitivity in the poet.

Either way, this brings into question both the ability of the classifier to be objective, and the true identity of the item being classified. This particular evening appears to be typical of its kind, but the possibility that it is atypical suggests its association with key factors, such as its “coming in / Across the fields” and its silken appearance, are in some way deceiving. If the poet extends his definition of evening to include this particular one, is the purpose of classification compromised or enhanced? Is it the “hands / That cannot feel” that are at fault? Do their preconceived notions of evening allow them to experience only what is consistent with certain pre-judged qualities, or have they been deliberately weighed down by the deceptive evening? The poet does not try to identify the issues or to evaluate their importance.

From outside the confusion, which is the poet’s own, the reader expects to be at least a little more clear-sighted. It would seem that evenings are something that have been much the same over time, and that it is the human perception of them that varies. If the poet perceives this, the apparently aberrant evening will be catalogued along with the other evenings, because of its evening-like appearance, or because what comes in “Across the fields” at that time of day has always been evening. It would be difficult to argue that this particular evening was, in fact, something else, without compromising the idea of the fields, which are not presented as deceptive or defective, as an actual place. It is the effects of the evening rather than the evening



itself -- the strength or potency of its healing and its texture -- that the poet finds to be faulty.

This evening seems deceptive or defective because Larkin's idea of evening is too rigid. Useful stereotypes have an element of fluidity that allows continual assessing and reassessing, defining and redefining. In a library or other database this is dealt with by the formation of sub-categories, with each piece of information stored in any number of these where it satisfies the criteria for membership. This is common practice in library systems, but one that is complicated to set up and clumsy to use, and therefore limited. Larkin, too, is limited in his matching and juxtaposing of data. He has already noted an evening in "Winter Nocturne" (1938, *CP* 225) when "the dusk [stole] slowly in, / Crossing the dead, dull fields with footsteps cold." This evening makes no pretence at textural or temporal softness, but is "Hard as granite and as fixed as fate." Clearly, Larkin's experience already includes evenings that are neither comforting nor silken, and the surprise he expresses twelve years later might be at the silken appearance rather than absence of silken texture of the new, comfortless evening.

It would seem that rather than an all-encompassing coherent stereotype of evening, Larkin's working definition is composed of multiple, disconnected and sometimes contradictory fragments. He may be compelled to conclude that although both these evenings have evening-like qualities, one of them is false, an impostor, a pseudo-evening. Alternatively he may refuse to acknowledge that the evening-like qualities are actually as they appear, insist that the difference is in some way fundamental, and refuse to treat one or other of these evenings as a member of the evening species. Larkin is confused because he regards his set of criteria that define evening as fixed, yet they differ at different times. This is due to his own subjectivity, and he fails to acknowledge the fact that some of the qualities that define the genus for him are at least somewhat arbitrary. On both occasions he has privileged the status of current classification criteria and neglected to make a thorough cross-reference between classifications. Here, because the categories

remain disconnected, the value and consistency of the individual components are distorted. No matter how many catalogue entries he makes for the problem evening, he is still not sure on which shelf it belongs.

Larkin's tendency to compartmentalise is also evident in his attitude to writing. By the time he is in his forties, his rigid dependence on a range of narrow, disconnected systems extends to having the correct accoutrements about him, and this is reflected in his comment in a letter to Barbara Pym: "As usually happens when I am far from my MS book, I feel I could do one or two poems. Let's hope the feeling survives."<sup>50</sup> The use of the verb "do" rules out the idea that it might have been revisionary or editorial work that Larkin referred to, in which case he might well need his MS in order to begin. In addition, he did not always concentrate on finishing one poem before he started another. There is, therefore, no reason to think that Larkin is referring to anything other than "one or two [new] poems". Paper napkins and shirt cuffs, it seems, are simply not the kind of material on which poems might be composed. His letters, too, show a continuing preoccupation with accoutrements, especially notepaper.<sup>51</sup> He frequently makes mention of the colour, quality, kind or source of the paper on which he writes; and writing to Kingsley Amis in 1942, he says "I must close -- there's no more of this paper left",<sup>52</sup> implying that to send another, unmatched sheet is unthinkable. In contrast to his fine sensibilities regarding paper the language he inscribes can vary according to his whim, and he is formal, intimate and downright coarse, as the mood takes him. He makes free, in a light-hearted manner, with the conventions of spelling and grammar, often transgressing these for humorous effect. In doing this, Larkin widens the range of 'bad' language on which he may draw in order to claim an increased degree of camaraderie with his recipient. At no stage, however, is there an indication that Larkin realises the paradox of his granting himself permission to fragment and rearrange language, whilst insisting on tidy notepaper. The subversive nature of the letter's contents are, in the end, defused by its conventional appearance,

and while there is not exactly a ‘plot’, the whole of the contents is safely confined to paper.

This simultaneous bid for revolt and conventionality represents an inability to fully cross-reference complicated intricacies of interrelated subject matter, and mirrors what is, perhaps, the most glaring flaw in any library system. But even with databases such as the human mind or computerised systems, where physical space is not a problem, and retrieval almost instantaneous, the cross-referencing and decision-making regarding the relevance of information are done laboriously by effort guided by insight. In libraries, new texts, each with a complicated set of cross-relevances, are regularly incorporated into the system. Each text reaches out to numerous other texts, and these connections can be seen as infinite, much in the way that (linguists tell us) there is an infinite number of possible utterances. The world, however, is thought of as a finite system, making the idea that there is a way of achieving a complete and fully cross-referenced set of data seem feasible. Even if a complete set of data is theoretically possible, it is beyond what is humanly possible. There will always be unknown and unknowable factors: a perceived lack of plot that humans seek to render organised by stereotyping.

Larkin demonstrates stereotyping as a process of fragmentation by simplification in his poem “Modesties”, completed in 1949:

Words as plain as hen-birds’ wings  
Do not lie,  
Do not over-broider things -  
Are too shy. (*CP* 26)

Simplicity, then, tells the truth. All the rest is superfluous embroidery. Yet semantic complexity is denied, for the plainness of the “hen-birds’ wings” also tells of the need to hide, and of an importance that is so assured that a show of bright colours is superfluous. If the plain hen is considered as the plain truth, and the cock as “over-broider[ed]” what remains is a startling example of the gap created by the failure to cross-reference sufficiently. The truth is reduced to the unstartling, the unremarkable, where visually-oriented flamboyance has no place but falls through the gaps in the structure. Because it is built on the premise that plainness does not

lie, this suggests that complexity or beauty might be inherently false. If this is so, then the inconsistencies necessary to this conclusion must also be desirable; but, because we know that it *is* possible to lie in plain, or vernacular, language, this theory does not bear the kind of exhaustive testing that would establish its worth.

Truth is commonly referred to as plain, or simple, or even naked, but here it is also described as shy. It is this shyness (a quality Larkin himself is famous for) that prevents the taking on of a guise that might deceive. The idea that it is plainness that arrests the attention, and shyness that is able to make itself understood, follows on from this. I would venture to suggest, however, that real life does not follow this pattern: that it is the loud and the colourful that are noticed; that it is volubility and repetition that are most often believed. The power of the hen, then, lies in her ability to hide. As long as she remains hidden she is like a boundless secret waiting to be revealed; yet at the same time, her complexities remain undisclosed and she seems “plain” not because she is in plain sight, but because she is not. Larkin has judged this hen by her feather-cover.

The hen is in what may be euphemistically termed a ‘plain, brown wrapper’ that belies her sexuality, her autonomy, and the complexity and multiple ethical viewpoints represented by what is concealed. This gives her some important properties in common with works of literature. Like the hen, works of literature are not to be judged by outward appearances as a plain cover may hide a complex work, or an attractive cover a badly researched or merely boring one. Like her, they cannot fulfil their function alone. Thus the flamboyant male is the reader, and the quiet, “plain” female is the book that resides on the shelf and reveals herself to the reader on demand (with the librarian’s permission), allowing the reader to control the amount and nature of the contact. This is reminiscent both of the people Duffy writes about, who also treat thought-processing as a closed system, and of the way Larkin regards some people in his life, especially the women closest to him. By treating them much as he treats texts he is able to feel in control. (A thorough investigation of this tendency will occupy part of the following chapter.)

Larkin's cross-referencing, as in a library, is incomplete: he neglects to integrate all his senses into the process, and frequently separates reason and emotion, so that, while conflicting conclusions are possible from the same data, his rigidity of mind prevents the imaginative seeking of resolutions to these dichotomies. The enormity of the task of feeding the library/database to ensure that it grows, combines with the power accorded information to disguise shortcomings built into the system, and allows (and causes?) Larkin to fail to accept or appreciate the nature of the compromises he is forced to make.

In or out of a library, however, books are silent. Librarians and other readers must make their own judgement about the content of any volume. Judgement may not always be based on an entire book, and it is impossible to perform a thorough range of comparative readings of each book. The contents of some volumes are bound to contradict the contents of others, so that if one is accepted, another must be rejected, or a new compromise reached. If the value of the library system where all texts regarded as equal is to be upheld, no fixed truth is possible, but a 'right' set of answers may well appear possible, provided these gaps of contradiction are closed or hidden. Larkin does not often question the possibility of there being a 'right' or 'best' action, or his own ability to categorise. In his own life, the application to his own life of techniques that work well in the library have an equally significant but less advantageous influence, reinforcing his natural tendency to subjectivity and self-centredness.

In the thirty-odd years between the birth of Larkin in 1922 and the birth of Duffy in 1955, the general perception of the value of information and information systems<sup>53</sup> underwent a series of changes. These are apparent in the behaviour of individuals, and in the way education has become more inquiry-based, and less fact-based, but can be seen most clearly in attitudes to official information. Clearly, in spite of an enormous archive, the State was vulnerable and fallible, because as the Empire eroded, so did the power attributed to the archive. This resulted in loss of

confidence in the State; but faith in the power of archive and information survived and was transferred to other structures.

Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy have very different attitudes towards data, and very different strategies for processing information. Even allowing for personal differences, this must be partly attributed to the prevailing intellectual climates of their formative years. Duffy has learned to question in a way which allows her to retain a degree of fluidity that Larkin lacks. This relates directly to their respective home and educational experiences, and is plainly evident in their poetry, where Larkin seeks to define and explain, and Duffy seeks to examine and explore. By making the librarian in “Model Village” dysfunctional, Duffy makes it clear that although she recognises that textualising aspects of life that are properly outside the text allows the illusion of predictability and control, she does not accept this as a viable formula for life. This makes it unlikely that she would textualise her own life, or the people around her, in the way that Larkin does, and this is the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>1</sup> This quotation comes from the *Radio Three Magazine*, November 1982, p42, and is reproduced in *The Imperial Experience: From Carlyle to Forster* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996, p12), by C.C. Eldridge. Hereafter this work will be acknowledged as 'Eldridge, 1996'.

<sup>2</sup> The obsessive gathering of data that followed the Enlightenment, its climax in the nineteenth century and carry-over into the twentieth century are all described in Thomas Richards' book, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said makes this point in detail, throughout his major works *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> This can be partly attributed to the advent of the computer, and the study of artificial intelligence. The corporate sector has also been quick to use this material to promote efficiency and competitiveness in the workplace. For this reason, I later quote some texts of a genre that are not usually associated with literary study.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, in *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, Colin Gordon [ed], translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper) notes a change away from an imperialist model of control towards a fascist one, and places this at about 1940 (18).

<sup>6</sup> Obviously, as Larkin was not only born before Duffy, but also had his life well documented, there will, initially at least, be more to say about him. Later chapters will redress this imbalance by concentrating more closely on the poetry.

<sup>7</sup> Richards, 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> John Willinsky states this in his text, *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 203.

<sup>9</sup> Richards, 11. Richards gives a time span of 1870-1940.

<sup>10</sup> Richards, 140-2.

<sup>11</sup> Richards, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Sydney Larkin. This document is a hand written manuscript held in the Larkin archives at the Brynmor Jones Library, at the University of Hull, England (DLN 1/9).

<sup>13</sup> Philip Larkin. Handwritten and untitled, held in the Larkin archives at the Brynmor Jones Library, at the University of Hull, England (DLP 14an).

<sup>14</sup> Richards, 33

<sup>15</sup> Richards cites the advent of total war as one of the main explanations for loss of faith in the State as the repository of knowledge (32).

<sup>16</sup> Richards, 43-4.

<sup>17</sup> Ian I. Mitroff, and Harold A. Linstone, *The Unbounded Mind: Breaking the Chains of Traditional Business Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 127.

<sup>18</sup> Richards records that during 1944, Allied High Command believed in the mythology of the power of information, but were not sure what constituted information. Consequently, they tried to note everything (141), including 'signs' and the paranormal, in order to predict the enemy's action. This system included the idea that there was an element of magic in epistemology (142), and supported the expectation that there is a basic ordering code of life in the imperial archive, a "unity of knowledge" (151).

<sup>19</sup> Mitroff describes the Asch effect: that people tend to conformity, to agree with views they hear expressed, and that these outside views can take precedence over the individual's own experience (24-7). In *Measuring the Impact of Information on Development* (Ottawa: International Research Centre, 1993), Michel Menou writes that "Contrary to the hopes expressed in the 1950s and 1960s, information is no magic recipe for development" (24).

<sup>20</sup> Willinsky, 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Mitroff, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Rob Jackaman, *A Study of Cultural Centres and Margins in British Poetry Since 1950: Poets and Publishers* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Sinfield defines civilian morale in this way in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post War Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Motion, Larkin's biographer and personal friend, spoke of this in conversation with me when I paid him a brief visit at his home in 1996. He also remarked that Kitty Larkin spoke with a Midlands accent.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 41. Hereafter this work will be acknowledged as *Life*.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Larkin, in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* (Anthony Thwaite ed., London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 44-45. Larkin was writing to Kingsley Amis, and the letter is dated 19 September 1942. Hereafter this text is acknowledged as *Letters*.

<sup>27</sup> See *Letters*, 45. (To Kingsley Amis, 18 October, 1942.)

<sup>28</sup> Mitroff, 64-5, and *Thinking and Deciding*, Jonathon Baron (2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 [first edition 1988]), 262.

<sup>29</sup> Willinsky, 175, and chapter 11.

<sup>30</sup> B.C. Bloomfield, "Brought to Book" *Philip Larkin and his Biographer, Some Reminiscences* (Edinburgh: Friends of the Edinburgh University Library, 1995), 5. Larkin did not like his friends and acquaintances to compare notes on him, and he was nervous of what Bloomfield might learn in the course of his inquiries.

<sup>31</sup> The word 'stereotyping' is not used with any value added component, but in the way that psychologists use it, to describe a cognitive process. The words 'stereotyping' and 'cataloguing' denote very similar processes, but the word stereotyping is intransitive and denotes an activity that happens within the human mind.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Ann Duffy gives regular readings of her own poetry, takes creative writing workshops, writes plays and is editor of the poetry section of *Ambit*.

<sup>33</sup> Jackaman, 104. Jackaman notes that Kingsley Amis, in "Nocturne", "gravitated ... rapidly from anti-Romanticism to anti-humanity."

<sup>34</sup> It is possible that this librarian is female, but the position of dominant male is strongly evoked and so I refer to the librarian as 'he'.

<sup>35</sup> Mitroff, 65. "Remove all risks and one not only removes all knowledge but its very possibility."

<sup>36</sup> Professor Juliet McMaster of the Juvenilia Press, in the Dean of Arts' Prestige Lecture entitled "'Adults' Literature' by Children", given on the 3rd of June 1998 at the University of Canterbury, notes that children who write fiction tend to take on an authority, a control and a body of knowledge often considered beyond their years, and cites parental disapproval of such juvenile usurpation.

<sup>37</sup> *Letters*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> *Life*, 109.

<sup>39</sup> *Life*, 110.

<sup>40</sup> *Letters*, 462.

<sup>41</sup> This was said as part of an interview with Miriam Gross of the *Observer* in 1979, reproduced in Larkin's *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 51.

<sup>42</sup> Jackaman establishes this as a central argument of his book. That Larkin was influential is also evident in the correspondence held in the archives at Hull.

<sup>43</sup> Richards says that seeing the empire as an "extended nation" has lent a "symbolic unity" to the overview (3).

<sup>44</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, in the "Times Literary Supplement", May 12 1995. V 4806, 6b.

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Burt, "High Windows and Four Letter Words: A note on Philip Larkin" (*Boston Review*, Nov 96). This article appeared along with the advertisement for the *Boston Review*, on the WorldWideWeb.

<sup>46</sup> *Letters*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> *Letters*, 103.

<sup>48</sup> *Letters*, 124.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, (edited with an introduction by Anthony Thwaite [London: The Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 1988], 3). Hereafter this work is acknowledged as *CP*.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters*, 355.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, Larkin mentions paper in *Letters*, 262, 268, 383, 489, 501, 502, 503, 538, 609. It is also interesting that the poems he wrote and attributed to Brunette Coleman, entitled "Sugar and Spice", have been typed and pasted onto sugar paper.

<sup>52</sup> *Letters*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> The term "information system" is used here in an inclusive way, and refers to the processes by which data is organised and contextualised, including both those of the human mind, such as reasoning, and to the organisation of data, outside the mind, as text (again in the broadest sense) whether this text be in the form of hard copy, or in the form of potential text, stored electronically, magnetically, or whatever.



## Chapter 2

### Book-World: Ruling the Pages

Outside the library, the lack of plot makes people unpredictable, and the presence of commonly observed social obligations renders community living onerous. But a library/empire peopled by books is relatively easy for a human (even a severely dysfunctional human) to control. In library-land, the librarian not only has the upper hand (the only hand?) in all matters, but also the ability to appear to perform miracles, such as moving mountains of books, classifying and reclassifying individual texts, turning the lights on and off, turning up the heat, and even changing the library layout. This high degree of geographical and climatic control lends an aura of divinity that is intensified by the fact that, in a large library, the librarian has access to ‘angels’ of mercy who can repair and rebind, breathing new life into old or infirm texts. Because in a community of books the complexities of life, including those associated with interpersonal relationships, can be contained, catalogued, cross-referenced and shelved, the librarian need not allow texts freedom of thought or deed.

Thus book-people are easily controlled. In the outside world, however, people have volition, intellect, emotion, and reciprocal social behaviours. People do not behave like books, but writing about them as if they had some text-like qualities, and introducing librarian-like qualities into ordinary life, are strategies that increase the apparent quotient both of predictability and control. Philip Larkin, a librarian in real life, and Carol Ann Duffy’s librarian (“Model Village” [SM 21]), who perhaps

provides something of a caricature of Larkin-the-librarian, have sought the control that administering a land of books can offer; for however open texts might be to alternative readings, to textualise is to delineate and to limit. Those who are accustomed to wield power over book-people would not seek to be the subject of another's text. Even the dysfunctional model librarian has an incipient awareness of the limitations his book-people must endure in order to facilitate his wide ranging control, so that it is likely that he would regard the efforts of a biographer as threatening.

For the mad librarian being written is not an issue, but both Larkin and Duffy realise that texts, and in particular books, are an integral part of their lives, not just because of what they read and write, but because they are written about. There are some important ways in which these two poets, because they have achieved a degree of fame and acclaim for their work, are in the same boat. Both act to protect their privacy, and to keep readers guessing, by seldom giving interviews. Both comment on biography as a means to vicarious experience bordering on voyeurism. Each has written a poem that is spoken, in part, through the mouth of an imagined biographer; and both compel their respective biographers to reveal more about their own foibles than about those of their subjects. But in keeping with his ambivalent attitudes to life in general, Larkin exhibits diametrically opposed attitudes towards biography. For instance, in his review of the biography of Wilfred Owen, which he entitles "The Real Wilfred", he takes biographer, Jon Stallworthy, to task:

Where his book is less satisfactory is in its lack of emphases and its general suspension of judgement on the kind of person we now know Owen to have been, and how this new knowledge relates to his work. The evidence is there, but perhaps through the very scrupulousness that ensures its accurate presentation Stallworthy refrains from interpreting

it. For instance, it is now quite clear that the fundamental biographic [*sic*] fact about Owen is that he was his mother's boy: his family situation was sufficiently like that of D. H. Lawrence for the comparison to be made.<sup>1</sup>

Larkin not only castigates the biographer for his lack of psychological interpretation, but also goes on to castigate Owen, citing what can only be regarded as rather spurious evidence -- spurious because much of it is based on prejudice (Sassoon's assessment of Owen as 'provincial'), and on criticisms that can also be leveled, in varying measure, at Larkin himself (attachment to and constant correspondence with his mother; failure to "be in love"; the accusation of being a "Lone Wolf").<sup>2</sup>

The other side of Larkin's attitude to biography can be seen in his poem, "Posterity" (*CP* 170), which is written to cover rather than to record what really happened. Larkin did not have a biographer at the time, but he did have a bibliographer, and that this made him self-conscious and secretive is well documented. In his poem, Larkin writes about his speaker, Jake Balokowsky, as if he were Larkin's own biographer. In a different sense, that is just what he is: a biographer belonging to, or owned by, Larkin, and subject to Larkin's textual control. Larkin uses this power to undercut the authority of what is to be someone else's textual rendering of him, making it evident that he is nervous of being written and read (or seen through). Andrew Motion refers to "Posterity" as the poem that is most useful in summing up the way Larkin felt about biography. He notes that although Larkin "likes to scoff at many of the basic tenets of biography itself", and "derided its willingness to rely for psychological insights on formative childhood experiences",<sup>3</sup> he later came to see Jake Balokowsky as rather like himself in that

they both wanted to do one thing and were forced to do another. This, Larkin says, may explain why Balokowsky is drawn to his work.<sup>4</sup>

Larkin is prepared to admit that subconscious processes of identification have led Jake Balokowsky to someone like himself, but he stops short of saying that if his imagined biographer and he are alike, it is because he made them so, perhaps from a similar subconscious psychological process of his own. Had Larkin gone this far, he might have been tempted to relate the likeness, if not to some “childhood experience”, then at least to a set of early adult experiences, or to apprehension about the reception of his poetry. Motion says that the amount of his writing came as a surprise to most people when the *Collected Poems* was published, so it is clear Larkin had hidden much away, and this suggests he needed to feel safe about revealing himself, through his work, to public view.

In order to preserve his own privacy while also preserving his public image, Larkin *needs* to discredit the biographer. In this way he can throw doubt on any insights or conclusions that the biographer might make that are not in line with the public persona Larkin had taken so much trouble, throughout his adult life, to make convincing. Motion says of “Posterity”:

The poem encapsulates the whole range of paradoxes which made up Larkin’s attitude to publicity. The soul of shy modesty was also a self-promoter; the man admired for avoiding bright lights was continually tempted to step into them; the ‘Hermit of Hull’ was his readers’ friend, winning their trust and warm affection by telling them a good deal about himself.<sup>5</sup>

Jake Balokowsky has a similar interest in the biographical text. It is not only his opportunity (by remaining in the background) to shine in public, but his opportunity to attain the kind of immortality that writing can offer by coupling his name with

that of an established artist. For this to happen, the artist must remain popular, at least in some circles, so the biography needs to protect the subject's image by treading a fine line between truth (and revelation) and the established fiction. Jake dismisses what he does not want to write about by saying his subject is "One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys", covertly asserting that there is nothing shocking or unnatural that might upset the position of the poet in the public mind, and that "fouled-up" is synonymous with 'normal'. At the same time Jake is able to regard himself as more informed than the poet, because he can categorise the poet's phobias, shoulder-chips and shortcomings.

But of course, in "Posterity", it is Larkin who has written the words that Jake is speaking. Clearly, part of Larkin feels that the only way to be safe is to prevent a biography being written (by hiding the evidence), but another part of him seeks it so actively that he must engineer a cover-up in advance. Motion says that Larkin is "trapp[ed]... between opposing impulses", and that this makes writing his biography more difficult because, rather than being "diversified by event", its dramatic content is "performed on an inner stage".<sup>6</sup> These are performances that only Larkin could attend, and it would be interesting to know what Larkin thought was included in the "Freshman Psych" to which he has Jake compare him. If he sees it as ambivalence and introversion, then Larkin might have demonstrated as sharp an assessment of his own position through the voice of Jake as any he has made, although it is unlikely this was his real intention.

Duffy's biographer in "The Biographer" (*MT* 45) has much in common with Jake Balokowsky, and it is possible that this poem is a response to Larkin's. Duffy's biographer's identification with his subject is obvious. Not only does he "stand at

your desk, / [his] fingers caressing the grooves in the wood / your initials made”, quoting “one of your lines”, but one night he “slept alone in your bed”. The sexual implications of the caress are clear: the subject has been feminised by the imprint of text formed by the “grooves”, which, in true Freudian form, represent the feminine by an absence. But at the very time when the biographer feels that he is closest to a merger with his subject, the transcendence fails: he is thwarted by the realisation that his hero would have despised him. This re-separation of writer from subject and back to individual is inconclusive, however, because later, when the work is finished, it is difficult to tell just whose life it is that he refers to when he says “I print it out.” Like Jake (and Larkin), this man sees himself as a failure because he knows his subject would not like or approve of him, and because he is writing biography when he would rather be writing something else -- something he considers to be more artistic. But Duffy’s “biographer” differs in that his subject, who is not named, is dead, male, and very famous. Duffy’s poem shows more concern for the problems of living in someone else’s shadow than in forestalling the findings of any actual biographer concerning her own life, and that may be because she does not yet have a bibliographer (as Larkin did) to make her nervous and to highlight the pitfalls of having one’s work documented in minute detail.

Although Larkin resists being textualised by Jake and writes to ‘get in first’, he has no objection to textual representations of his life and relationships when these are under his own control. True, he arranged for his diaries to be destroyed, but he also organised his personal archive, especially the letters, into shoe boxes with the initials of the sender on the outside of the box. The box room of his house was filled with his personal archives, and organised in a library-like state of orderliness. Some

of the documents and some of the boxes Larkin had kept were quite old, and had been moved from place to place as he moved from flat to flat.<sup>7</sup> Larkin has his own past charted for posterity, and the box room and these documents constitute an archive department in his home library: a place where he could textualise himself, but which he could also step outside. Thus, unlike Duffy's dysfunctional speakers, who disappear into their own texts, Larkin is able to go on textually constructing and reconstructing himself, in a life that is to become a *Life* with at least a semblance of plot that will continue to develop, even after he is dead.

Like Larkin, Duffy's biographer also seeks a sense of self through the act of documentation while examining textual evidence in an attempt to capture the subject he has never met. He sees that "an early daguerreotype shows you / excitedly staring out / from behind your face," and surrounded by the subject's own texts, sees "the faces you wrote / leer and gape and plead at my feet." The person he seeks to reduce to text has been in the habit of creating other textual people, but without the constrictions experienced by the biographer who must account for a life already lived and documented. Later, to show how difficult this is and how, through text, the process unites him with his subject, he says, "I write you and write you for five hard years".

The work may be difficult, but that it has a factual basis is enough to ensure that biography is not deemed creative; and indeed there is a demand for 'objective reporting' that is thought to preclude artistic freedom. Such writing is often set in opposition to creativity, and it is regarded as less satisfying, or noble, than creative writing. The biographer feels he has been emasculated by the demotion from the position he feels he deserves, even though it is one that he cannot actually attain. He

says “I have an affair with a thespian girl”, although like Jake (but unlike Larkin, who can indulge in creative writing) he has family responsibilities and owes loyalty to his wife. He forgets these restraints for a while, seeking to link hard writing with creative writing through a display of virility and a test of his attractiveness. When he has finished his work he says:

then I snivel home to my wife.  
 Her poems and jam.  
 Her forgiveness.  
 Her violent love.  
 And this is a life.  
 I print it out.  
 I print it out.

Again, the life he seeks to textualise is that of his subject, but it is also his own. His identity has become fused with that of the subject he has spent five years documenting, because the text he produces links them in a kind of immortal/textual state, and while the biographer lives it gives him a life within a *Life*. But textual assessment reminds him that, in his own eyes, he is a failure. His shift from an apparently successful denial to an acknowledgment of failure is signalled by a return to textual imagery (“I print it out”). This is a movement that is typical of Duffy’s poetry.

Duffy repeatedly demonstrates that textualising in this way does not preserve anything worthwhile, and that usually what is captured is a momentary door to intimacy, or a door to memory. Failure to move through these doors negates the effect of the offer. Larkin, when he or his work are the subject of the text (as in the bibliography), reacts to the textualising as if it were able to impose premature old age on him. This demonstrates, more than anything else, the authority he attributes to textual practices as a viable way of life. He uses textual imagery as a bid to



capture and preserve, only seldom rejecting the results, which, as text, are subject to his organisation and control. That the mastery this appears to offer is illusory is an important part of Duffy's message. In this she can be seen as the next stage, or historical development of Larkin, because she seems to have leapt from a springboard he prepared but that his conservatism and fear of change prevented him from ever using. Larkin is caught between his resistance to change, which is epitomised by his need to uphold a predictable *status quo* that will continue to support acceptable readings of his works, and his unwillingness to conform to the demands this places upon him. It is this potential for change that Duffy seems to tap into as she challenges the more conservative contingent of British society by exposing strategies for dominance inherent in the *status quo* that Larkin sought to uphold.

There are also differences in the kind of thing that is textualised. For instance, while Larkin makes many direct references to the macro-systems of life, such as the time and the cyclic events of nature, Duffy, except for those concerned with language, makes relatively few, preferring to ground her poetry in the specificity of individuals, their feelings, and their experiences. Both poets observe writing that appears on the world around them, such as that formed by shadow, but draw different conclusions from their readings. In Duffy's poem, "Dies Natalis" (*SM* 10-12), although the sea bird notes that its shadow is a "cross on the surface", it is an 'x' not on the spot, but "follow[ing], marking where I was in the middle of nowhere", but more importantly, there is the sense that such geographical exactness is neither necessary nor desirable to a free entity. That this shadow writing fails to contribute a sense of place or to record or pinpoint the bird's location is not

something to be lamented or remedied, but something to be celebrated. This is in contrast to the “industrial shadows” in Larkin’s “Here” (*CP* 136): these are quite reliable as indicators of place and location, not so much because they are static, but because, unlike the bird, Larkin relies on shadows to orient himself. Furthermore, in “MCMXIV” (*CP* 127), the “wheat’s restless silence” protects and preserves the “Shadowing Doomsday lines” and their historical message, while the “Doomsday lines” retain their relationship to location as a guarantee of their veracity and to enable their preservation of the past. And in “Whatever Happened?” (*CP* 74) “the map / Points out how unavoidable it was”, showing that the text retains its power to speak as agent for location and place even as “whatever happened starts receding”. Clearly, while Duffy’s bird is its own centre and can orient itself to the environment, Larkin looks to the environment for signs by which he can plot his position.

Again, in Duffy’s “Practicing Being Dead” (*SM* 9), although the speaker seeks the past in text, it is “already lost as you open door/ after door, each one / peeling back a sepia room empty of promise.” In contrast, Larkin tries to capture not only the past as text, but all time, and is willing, in the short term, to reject other fundamental things (nature, human relationships) in order to do this. In “To My Wife” (*CP* 54), he calls the future a “peacock-fan” that, open and therefore flat, is “temptingly spread”, but which closed loses its offer of a reading, leaving “No future now.” In “Mother, Summer, I” (*CP* 68), Larkin rejects his own reading of the future/text, and although the “thunderstorms” lose their “grape-dark clouds” once “mother... / ...shakes / It out” flat, like a canvas, he remains suspicious because “summer day[s]” imply a “perfect happiness / [he] can’t confront”. Although the happiness written on the summer leaves is contained by the trees, and not directly

threatening, he is also “easier when the leaves are gone”, because when they fall, unlike the leaves of a book, or the peacock fan (which is also only desirable when it is static), they disperse, scrambling the signs and changing the message. This autumn message reminds Larkin of his own mortality, so that he rejects the summer messages of happiness and growth in an attempt to negate not only the inevitable autumnal fall, but his own eventual death. And in the second stanza of “‘Many famous feet have trod’” (*CP* 15), he textualises time and light. In this poem the light that brings the daily rebirth from sleep is “A sheet”, which, although it “paves”, is not beneath the feet, but in “The palaces of sight”, where, because it is a sheet and flat, it may possibly be ‘read’. In the ninth stanza, it is not the season, but the “almanac” that is “foiled”, showing that the passage of time can also be experienced as ‘reading’, and that as text it can be subverted.

In “Wants” (*CP* 42), Larkin reduces social life to “invitation-cards” that make “the sky [grow] dark”; “sex” to a set of “printed directions”; the family to a “[photograph] under the flagstaff”; and the subjective perception of time to the “artful tensions of the calendar, / The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites”. Family, society, and sex have all failed in some way, perhaps by demanding reciprocity, but on this occasion time has been “artful”, not showing a proper sense of plot that would bring life under the control of the writer. All are reduced to text so that they become manageable, and a flattened oblivion, too, appears both satisfactory and achievable. In an earlier poem, “Sinking like sediment though the day” (*CP* 27), Larkin reveals that the whole “Horror of life” is also two dimensional -- “a bitter carpet” that, once settled, brings clarity of vision where

there is nothing positive to be seen. “Wants”, then, reveals not a moving on, but a consolidation of position.

Duffy, however, debunks this bid for textual reduction and control in “Sanctuary”:

In the Library your shaking hand takes up a book,  
thumbs miracles. These men were saved, prescriptions  
scrawled upon their dreams. (*SM* 14)

The text fails, because although “you were cured”, it happened only “one sunset as you died elsewhere”. In “Homesick” (*SM* 19), too, there is no textual salvation when “We scratch in dust with sticks, / dying of homesickness / for when, where, what.” In this instance the problem is not with the sign, but that the medium on which the sign is inscribed is the wrong dust.

Duffy demonstrates repeatedly that textualising an unstable identity will not render it stable. In “Model Village”, which was discussed in the previous chapter, it becomes obvious that the librarian only regards himself as having succeeded in his textual empire because he is mad. In “The Suicide” (*MT* 41) “The horrid smiling mouths / pout on the wallpaper... / / [and] My body is a blank page I will write on.” The writing is to be done with “knives” that will inscribe “a bloody valentine pumping its love hate love” that will prove the speaker to be “Utterly selfless” and “kill [the speaker’s] folks.” In this poem, not only the material on which the writer proposes to inscribe the sign is inappropriate, but the instrument of inscription is also one of destruction. Not surprisingly, the message the writer intends to send is flawed and destined to fail. Even in “Ape” (*TOC* 20), when, as time passes, “you tear off / the page” of the calendar that depicts the silver-backed gorilla and really do “crumple a forest in your fist”, Duffy reveals that textualising succeeds only in

negativity, for it is not just the message of endangered species that arrives, but an ironic reminder that this warning itself poses an ecological threat.

In “Fraud” (*MT* 43), Duffy demonstrates the dangers of replacing the self with text. The fraud is his “own poem, / pseudonym,” and both the surface and the inscription are unstable, so that no meaningful sense of identity is established. Unlike Duffy, though, Larkin notes not the instability of fraud-as-text, but that the photograph “records / ...hold-it smiles as frauds” (*CP* 71). His perception of the text is that it automatically executes an inviolable system of justice, forcing the eye to a higher degree of unbiased assessment than is otherwise possible. For him the sign and the material of the text succeed not only in capturing data, but in facilitating a cognitive processing that makes ‘right’ conclusions unavoidable.

Larkin perceives the exercise of representing the world as text as a shoring up against fragmentation: as a way of organising the various facets of life. Once gathered together, he can re-fragment to his own pattern, in order to defuse the power he has gathered into the text. He seeks to cheat death by fracturing a word in “Träumerei” (*CP* 12) when he tells of the dream where ‘death’ is spelt out letter by letter, but he wakes “Before the word was spelt”, and so is safe. Although the word is semantically perceived, it is defused by its textual incompleteness. This is a slightly different strategy from the one he uses in his letters where he openly rearranges spelling, and by doing so mixes the semantic content of what may be quite separate words. In his letters this activity usually contains an element of fun which is much less apparent in the poems, but the process is the same, and sometimes appears almost in literal form, for instance, as a fan, in “To My Wife” (*CP* 54). In this poem Larkin relies on a pictorial image that, because it calls up a

well known pattern, functions in much the same way as a verbal one. First the brilliance of life is gathered into the splendour of the peacock fan; then, by an imaginary journey into matrimony he fractures, and hides, the brilliant picture. The process of breaking down the pattern of the feathers is similar to the breaking of the word in “*Träumerei*”, but by this fragmentation he achieves a twofold purpose: first he saves himself from both marriage and the demands of the exciting life he believes his single state offers; and second, he captures the disarmed fragments and sets, or fixes, them in the poem. It is this tendency merely to re-set in his own personal concrete what he has fragmented that makes him most different from Duffy.

Like Larkin, Duffy regards language and text as having the inherent potential to fragment. This is evident in her textualisations of parts of the language system, where utterances and signs can fail. In “*Hard to Say*” (*TOC* 45), words that have lost their power are “grubby confetti, faded, tacky, blown far / from the wedding feast.” Furthermore, in “*Education for Leisure*” (*SFN* 15), Duffy shows the very act of inscription failing. In this poem the speaker is unable to recognise the mark on the window, or the dead body, as the fly he has squashed. Even though it is its own signifier, retaining its substance but not its shape, he says that the fly is in another language. The signs in the text fail to retain their semantic content in Shakespeare, too, and he says that this is also in another language. The only text that does succeed for this deranged speaker is his own name, which he is able to inscribe when he “breathe[s] out talent on the glass”. In his state of self-absorption, he can read only himself.

Duffy also examines language as a part of the system by which we learn, understand and transmit both data and knowledge. The speaker in “*Like Earning a*

Living” (*MT* 17), thinks of “Ambition. Rage. Boredom. Spite”, and wonders “How / do they taste, smell, sound?” This is an attempt to cross-reference the emotions with the senses, although in the next stanza “the long afternoon empties of air, meaning, energy, point.” Humans are restricted in their use of their own abilities, and there is a limit to the way in which their combined information systems can function. In “Saying Something” (*SFN* 18), although “Our private language starts the day”, still “the dreams we have / no phrases for slip through our fingers into smoke.” In dreams the speaker “stared at strangers”, and “[searched] / for a word to make them” her lover. The stratagem was effective, and the speaker “woke beside” the person for whom she searched. Words with magic properties are confined to the world of dreams, however, and although “Pedestrian daylight terms scratch / darker surfaces”, they never quite capture the “plain and warm material of love.” This is a system outside language, and is an act of faith which “My heart assumes”, based on semiotic information received from the bodily senses that are not directly involved in the use of language. These senses are aided by “Things [that] assume your shape; discarded clothes, a damp shroud / in the bathroom, vacant hands.” The paranormal “ghost / of love” also remains in the absence of the beloved, and shows its presence in “half-warm coffee cups or sheets, the gentlest kiss.” But it is the power of memory that ties all these together into a comprehensible whole, for when the speaker returns home, she “come[s] in / from outside calling [her beloved’s] name”. This speech act of “saying” an indefinable “something” triggers a sequence of feelings; and reinforces a whole body of semiotic powers that draw on the quality and duration of the relationship’s past, whilst simultaneously contributing to its future.

Duffy's references to language and the semiotic often relate to inter-personal relationships. She repeatedly shows that textualising a failed relationship does not preserve anything worthwhile. In "Adultery" (*MT* 38), firstly "Language / unpeels to a lost cry", showing that it is superficial, thin, and not well applied -- perhaps like paint, or perhaps like a tissue paper text. This is partly because of the deception, but also because the lover is "a bastard" who is acting out of self-interest. Later, however, the face of the lover appears "on a white sheet, gasping, radiant", captured in the mind of the speaker as a picture on a bed sheet. After the speaker returns home there is "selfish autobiographical sleep" and later, "the script -- illness and debt, / a ring thrown away in a garden / no moon can heal". In "Disgrace" (*MT* 48-9) there is a failure to communicate, because the "Cherished italics" do not survive the conversion from text to speech, but are "suddenly sour on our tongues", becoming "obscenities". Whatever is said comes out differently: as in "Education for Leisure", translated into "the wrong language". The scene in the kitchen on the morning after is a double communication breakdown: a "still life", a wordless but audible text with "Inconsolable vowels from the next room".

Again, Duffy shows no sign of linking textuality with successful or desirable human relationships, and (unlike Larkin) she certainly does not want to substitute the texts for persons. In "Close" (*MT* 37), there is a reference to the textual quality of a speaker who feels manipulated by a lover. There is nothing soft or romantic about this, though, because the lover "[has] me like a drawing," not only with outlines defined by the art of the lover, but "erased, coloured in, untitled, signed by your tongue." The signature is "The name of a country written in red on my palm, / unreadable." The speaker is labelled and defined, coloured and claimed by the



lover, who, in traditional imperialist way, has planted a foreign flag and claimed the territory. This places the beloved in the position of chart, or map, and although “I tell myself where I live now,/ ...you move in close till I shake, homeless,” because the self of the beloved has been appropriated by the lover. The beloved is powerless to resist, because love “has me where I want me”, and the speaker is prepared to forfeit personal territory to continue the relationship. Although she presents this as understandable, unlike Larkin Duffy does not see this as desirable, for she notes that the “song” uttered by the coloniser and the colonised is “tuneless” and “our mouth” is as “black” as an “open window”. There is only one mouth because the appropriation of the beloved’s territory has not allowed the retention of enough authority for a voice that can be heard. They must speak as one, and that one is the lover. By rearranging the spaces, however, this could read “black a sour mouth”, accentuating the idea that the colonised’s inability to shape the spaces she occupies is the outcome of the domination, and that this is carried over into language and the ability to communicate from the position of oppression.

In “Lovesick” (*SM* 54), the photograph is considered by the speaker to be more desirable than the beloved apple, showing just how warped the speaker’s priorities are. The apple must be kept “safe” from the “sly moon”, and from “You with the big teeth”, and the only way the lover can achieve this degree of protection is to sacrifice the apple and transfer his/her affections to the photograph. The lover now has the photograph, which can stand in place of the beloved, and so need not spend time with the apple itself, which is rotting away in the attic.

This is similar to Larkin’s treatment of photographs, which are always presented as more desirable than the actual beloved. That Larkin did not wish to

commit himself to a relationship is relevant to the reversal of priority in “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” (*CP* 71), where it is the photograph album itself “which, / Once open, sent [him] distracted.” The sight of “All [her] ages/ Matt and glossy on the thick black pages!” is somehow “too rich”, because the “blemishes” that the photography “will not censor” override the presence of the woman herself, deceiving the poet into exclaiming that “this [photograph] is a real girl in a real place”. Larkin believes that the camera’s “candour” (presenting the double chin) gives her “grace” in a way that an artist might not, implying that an absence of artistic judgement, such as that which a painter might exercise, results in truth. But he shows his confusion when he asserts that the photograph is more “empirically true” than the young woman seated with him at the viewing. Larkin seems to be saying that a two-dimensional representation that includes ‘warts and all’ has a degree of veracity, a worth of reality, that the living woman lacks. As a human she cannot be “empirically true” because she is not objective, and it matters little whether she has emotional integrity because the photograph separates out the woman’s semiotic, substituting text, and renders her emotion superfluous. It is the fact that she evokes the past by “looking out of date” which “contract[s his] heart”.

Larkin indicates that he regards the photograph as a way of valuing, capturing and possessing someone else’s past. This is a static fragment of time, flattened and framed, that he can trust because it “Won’t call on [him] to justify” himself. While the photograph “holds [her] like a heaven, and [she lies] / Unvariably lovely there,” he can possess, classify, access, shelve or archive her at will. That Larkin fails to detect the woman’s blemishes or to see them as a measure of her veracity in the present demonstrates the strength of his drive to preserve a past that can support a

predictable present consistent with that past, and supports the idea that strategies for preservation of the past are more real for him than life. That the poem was so well received suggests that Larkin was able to tap into wide-spread nostalgia for a time when the photograph was still something of a novelty.

For Duffy the photograph is much less powerful or mysterious, and in “Before You Were Mine” (*MT* 13), she demonstrates its failure to afford any measure of control, or to act as a site where she can enter the life of the subject. Not only is she “ten years away”, but she says: “I’m not here yet. The thought of me doesn’t occur.” For her, a relationship that lacks a mutual recognition is not a possibility, so although this textual representation is of a real subject in a real place, it remains inert and cannot replace a live, physical presence, or act as a substitute. In “Never Go Back” (*MT* 30-1), photographs, negatives and script are the props that those who are out of touch with their own lives and times use to attempt to orient themselves. The snapshots are one of the “agreed motifs” of the bar-room talk, and in the second stanza “the friend, the alcoholic, whose head is a negative / of itself” says “*God, this is an awful place*”, stating what the speaker is loath to acknowledge. “The places you knew / have changed their names by neon,” but this is a step down rather than an improvement because the old house is crumbling, and the streets are peopled by prostitutes. As the speaker leaves “The train sighs / and pulls you away, rewinding the city like a film, / snapping it off at the river.” Unlike Larkin, Duffy associates film with what is *undesirable* in real life.

Duffy shows that it is when people step away from the text that they may gain what the text seemed to offer. In “Steam” (*MT* 36), the textualising succeeds, because the couple step through the door it opens into a physical and emotional

relationship. In the opaque air the lovers first glimpse each other as “a nude pose in soft pencil”, with the images blurred “behind tissue paper”. The image “appeared, [then] rubbed itself out, slow, / with a smoky cloth”, as the two moved about in the steam. In time, in “Say a matter of months”, the lovers “[reach] / through the steam” and as they touch the “ghost” vanishes, and they find they are both “the real thing, shockingly there”. Reality deprives the lovers of the dreamlike quality of the steam and the art of the soft pencil, but is hardly less desirable because it admits the possibility of communication and touch. In fact, the process here is the opposite of that used by Larkin. Here a new relationship progresses gradually from text to reality, and the reality is an improvement on the text.

Larkin, however, tries to mend or preserve relationships, some of which are already in the past and memory only, by forming a relationship with the text that gives access to memory, and finds this more successful than the relationship itself. His poems often move from relationship breakdown to text. Duffy, however, links the textual and relationship breakdowns as part of a loss of communication that is exacerbated when the semiotic fails. In her poetry successful relationships move from the text to the semiotic, and only the unsuccessful ones move from the semiotic to the text. Her most socially dysfunctional subjects (as in “Education for Leisure”, “Fraud”, “Suicide”) absorb the textual imagery and textualise themselves, perpetuating the fallacies and falsities that caused the trouble in the first place. Larkin’s subjects, however, do not textualise themselves in this way, but disappear into the text as Larkin takes over to pronounce a photograph as “a real girl”, or refers to “bosomy rose” (in “Wild Oats” [CP 143]), whom he has kept imprisoned as “two snaps” in his wallet for years. And in “Maiden Name” (CP 101), the “old

name shelters our faithfulness,” but the woman herself is “past and gone”, having future existence for the poet only through this writing of her former name.

Since Larkin displays the tendency to use an initial reduction to text followed by an artistic textual reconstruction as a way of gaining control, and because he is highly ambivalent about relationships, it is logical to carry this investigation a step further by comparing the ways in which he treats women who are close to him with the ways in which he treats texts. The women in his life are so frequently textualised (“Maiden Name” and “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” have already been discussed) that they, too, might be seen as works of varying degrees of literariness. Unlike the “hen-bird’s wings” in “Modesties” (*CP* 26) that Larkin associates with truth, however, the human women in his life are not “plain”, so that they must be treated with suspicion. Winifred Dawson recalls that, when Larkin looked at her photograph albums, he reciprocated by showing his to her, but that his had a significant number of pages taped together, and she was not permitted to see these.<sup>8</sup> It is Larkin, then, who is the “hen-bird” here, because he is able to hide from harm what is really important to him in much the way that a hen hides her eggs: by presenting a “plain” face that looks as if it cannot lie. At the same time, he claims the authoritative voice of the cock-bird, forestalling the danger that Winifred might get to know Monica by gazing on her.

Clearly, women need to be controlled, especially if they are to be trusted, and one way to do this is through an imposed sense of plot. This has the advantage of preventing the women/books from communicating directly with each other and autonomously forming ‘inter-textualities’ without reference to Larkin.<sup>9</sup> The women write, but their text is for his eyes only, leaving Larkin unchanged; but his letters and

poems radiate out from a central position to script the women's lives at the periphery. In much the way he continually rewrites his own life and saves it as archive, he rewrites the lives of those around him. In withholding selected photographs from Winifred's gaze, Larkin has manipulated her as a person; but as a book, she has merely been artistically censored, or kept 'in character' by the author/dictator.

Larkin not only censored his photograph album, but when he had his own office at Hull, he also censored the library shelves, keeping the more sexually explicit material in his office.<sup>10</sup> At home, too, he kept his most interesting books in the bedroom, so that people who visited would not see them and ask to borrow them.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that he had long been accustomed to such practices: he must have censored his family's reading of his juvenilia (it is likely that his mother, at least, would have disapproved of some of it). This, and his free perusal of Winifred's photograph album while offering only a limited sharing of his own, suggests that he felt entitled to claim a high degree of textual privacy without 'doing it back'. This double standard continues unexamined because he compartmentalises his life so that he may often escape a comparison between what is taken from others, and what is given to them. Winifred notes that he had some compartments well formed when she knew him in Belfast,<sup>12</sup> and that he protected himself from unwanted social duty in this way. In addition, he discouraged his friends, colleagues and neighbours from mixing independently of him, and it seems that he liked to mediate the interpersonal/intertextual relationships of those he considered to be close enough to him to possess any personal information about him.

Larkin's early desire for textual privacy expanded into his life in the library and throughout his adult life. In a sense, his house was a library. Books were all around, arranged in a hierarchy based on a personal assessment of their value. He did not like lending them, for they seemed, perhaps, like family members. After all, books were quite literally his intimate companions, if only because he spent so many evenings in their company. Perhaps the most intimate of his writings (after his diaries) were his poetry notebooks. These were not for public display in his lifetime, but are surely the company he longs for when he complains, as in "Vers de Société" (CP 181), of wasting time drinking "washing sherry" and chatting. These are the volumes where his artistic virility is textualised and spent, where he works his embryo inspirations into poems. Sometimes the end results, crafted and flawless in appearance, are made public, but even these are carefully selected. Many, we now know from the posthumous *Collected Poems*, remained secret until after his death.

The diaries, however, were the real secret service of Larkin's textual empire/state: they held 'official secrets' that had to be destroyed to prevent their being seen by any other regime. These books of his life could have no life of their own, and he "scripts" the official version of his life in "archives" in an "attempt to shut down alternative readings".<sup>13</sup> Thus he is librarian not only in the library, but also in his own life, and may, with only a minimum of remodelling of standard library practices, treat women like books to be acquired, bound, catalogued, lent out, recalled and shelved. Larkin also creates items for his life-library, using text in a bid to control his own life and appear as if he is the undeceived plain-hen-bird of truth. If he does not do this, other people may see through the official version, and some of these may be the women who are close to him, but to whom he declines to make a

commitment. The outcome of such an event might result in the women demanding commitment, or in their leaving him.

As usual, he seeks to keep these dangers at bay with text. Unavailable women may be rendered as text, and available women controlled better as text. But the women are more desirable as text. The love poems for Winifred, for instance, were written only after she became unavailable. And as early as 1946, in "Deep Analysis" (*CP* 4), Larkin talks about his girlfriend, Ruth Bowman,<sup>14</sup> as a "woman" whose "flesh is golden", "lying on a leaf" of "silver". The voice of the poet speaks for her, and it is difficult to be sure whether the speaker is a woman, or a man fantasising that he is a woman. Either way, the woman who is the object of discussion has been miniaturised to fit, prone, on a leaf. She does not squash the leaf, so the reader may assume she is without substance, a golden image, rather than a real woman.

This leaf, then, resembles a page in a book, and the woman who is not only "golden," but "Comely at all points," could well be a picture. Whether she is a picture in Larkin's mind or in a book, she is reduced to proportions that he can control, and he is her obsession. She wants to "make [his body] bright, that it might stand / Burnished before [her] tent". By this time in the poem, however, it is difficult to tell who the woman is -- she was the "golden" one, but now it is the man who has the chance to stand "burnished". Perhaps there is a suggestion of bisexuality here, or a colonisation of her identity, or perhaps Larkin is just not good at standing in someone else's shoes. Now, like a text, the woman can have "no death / Because of the darkness" of the misery, and because she is captured in this poem.



In his private life, Larkin textualises his sexual urges, particularly as “Sex, in printed or photocopy form”.<sup>15</sup> In 1956 he wrote that he would “go in for pornography ... if there were any guarantee of quality, & getting what you want”,<sup>16</sup> and steadfastly refused to see that commitment to real life relationships can have an artistically enriching dimension. Motion notes that Larkin’s attitude to pornography was not separated from his attitude to women or compartmentalised to be an alternative to heterosexual contact:

Larkin’s relationship with Patsy was the most happily erotic of all his affairs. Even with her, though, he insisted that there should be an element of fantasy, and said he wanted pornographic pictures to play a part in their love-making.<sup>17</sup>

Sexual activity with women inside relationships that have at least some interpersonal content, voyeurism, and ‘wanking’ to anonymous pictures, then, are not the opposite ends of a spectrum of sexual practice, but are jumbled together in the same compartment. This is made obvious when Larkin not only wants to introduce textual sexual stimulus into lovemaking, but also takes some pornographic magazines to work with him. These, like the ones at home, were for solitary sexual gratification.<sup>18</sup>

It is only possible to speculate why Larkin took these magazines to the office. It does throw light on his mature poem “Administration”, however, and suggests that this small squib is more significant than has previously been believed:

Day by day your estimation clocks up  
Who deserves a smile and who a frown,  
And girls you have to tell to pull their socks up  
Are those whose pants you’d most like to pull down. (*CP* 161)

It is highly unlikely that Maeve (one of Larkin’s girlfriends, and a librarian) is one of these ‘girls’, because by 1965 (when this was written) she was already a well

trained library worker of long standing. It is much more likely that the ‘girls’ referred to here are young and relatively inexperienced. And while there is no hint of impropriety in Larkin’s behaviour towards female workers in the library, it is characteristic that he chose to act textually rather than interpersonally. Knowing this adds weight to Motion’s assertion, speaking of “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, that

By covertly admitting to the pleasure it takes in fantasy, the poem connects with the other pictures Larkin liked to gaze at: the photographs in pornographic magazines. The sex life they entail -- solitary, exploitative -- is a crude version of the pleasure he takes in the album. We are reminded of it, too, in other poems which contain pictures of women ... and more faintly in others which render women as icons ...<sup>19</sup>

Larkin is able, says Motion, to rework his “masturbatory impulse and an addiction to solitude” and render these into “poems of great beauty and sociable truthfulness”. Larkin, however, records a more specifically “masturbatory” occasion in “Love Again” (*CP* 215), and the pornographic mental-picture he goes on to describe is not that of a woman posing, as in the ‘soft’ porn of his magazines, but of a couple indulging in the kind of foreplay that may well lead to intercourse. In addition, he relates the pain of his jealousy not to his heart but to what he sees as his own failure as an artist (“the usual pain”), and this is “like dysentery”. As in “Lines”, the images are “too rich”, and upset his artistic and sexual digestion. In particular, sexual desire has been down-graded to abdominal and anal discomfort and an outpouring of waste. Clearly, then, it is important to retain an awareness that what is under the “beauty” and the “sociable truthfulness” is plain, old-fashioned, sexual lust, which manipulates and demands satisfaction, and an attitude to sex that may possibly be unhealthy. In “Love Again”, Larkin does not separate emotions,

such as love, from lust, and fails even to acknowledge that the man who is dating Maeve on this occasion may offer a kind of reciprocity that she desires, but that he withholds from her. He does not see this as relevant to the pictures in his mental-magazine, which are explicitly and merely sexual. The implication is that although women are nice, texts are better and women are improved if they can be encouraged to behave like texts.

Larkin's text-women are also subjected to the library procedure of recall notices. Unlike actual books, these women cannot literally be kept on the bedroom shelf, and may come and go as they please; but if they are absent when he needs them Larkin acts to recall his favourites, often by means of a letter. Letters are an important part of Larkin's relationship strategies, and some of his relationships might be regarded as at least as much 'hetero-textual' as they are hetero-sexual. Another avid letter writer, E.M. Cioran, has noted that the letter is a "conversation with the absent", and so "represents a major event of solitude". "To the idler", he says, "exchanging letters gives the illusion of activities".<sup>20</sup> This is relevant because, although he is industrious in other ways, Larkin seeks to expend as little of himself on relationships as possible. Thus by writing letters he keeps relationships with women alive with a minimum of face to face contact, avoiding the need for spontaneous speech, and avoiding embarrassment. In this way the letters fulfil a similar function to that of the library catalogue (or the catalogue Duffy mentions in "Litany") because their use replaces speech, minimising social accountability.

In 1951, Larkin writes to Winifred, informing her that there is likely to be a good (but temporary) job becoming available in the library, and a chance that it will become a permanent position.<sup>21</sup> It seems he has taken it upon himself to mention her

name to the head librarian, and it is agreed that Larkin should make the first approach. Like any good librarian, Larkin sees acquisition and retention as important, and acts to prevent loss or theft by other users of his semi-private collection (and here the autonomy of the women themselves must be considered a prime factor). His *Selected Letters* contains many examples of excuses, apologies, denials and other general fence-mending that have the effect of allowing Larkin to do as he likes whilst retaining the loyalty and good opinion of the women in his life. This is particularly noticeable in the letters to Maeve and those to Monica, at a time when Maeve was pressuring him to tell Monica that he was also seeing her. In addition, Larkin manipulates the relationships between the women -- for instance, when he writes to mollify Patsy by including an implied complaint about Monica:

Certain *gibes*, certain *thrusts* in yr last letter made me think you'd picked up one or two remarks of mine by the wrong ear & trotter, but never mind. All I'll say is that *I* didn't do any of the dancing, & that my irritation about these holidays was directed against Monica -- most unjustly ...<sup>22</sup>

The implication is that Monica has irritated him merely by her presence, and that Patsy would not be privy to this confidence if she offended him in this way.

Of course Patsy is married, and like Monica, her husband is ignorant of this affair. Perhaps this makes them even in terms of deceit, but Larkin justifies his remarks by implying that Monica is, somehow, the less satisfactory companion, if only because in seeing her, Larkin's "guilt complex is increased".<sup>23</sup> It is not clear what he is actually guilty about, and there is a good chance he is not referring to his affair with Patsy but to some "Coronation tickets" that Monica seemed to expect. Either way, however, Patsy is given the message that she means more to him because he can talk to her about Monica, but he does not talk about her to Monica.

He evokes this exclusivity later the same year when he says: “You know, I *can’t* write this book: if it is to be written at all it should be largely an attack on Monica, & I *can’t* do that, not while we are still on friendly terms ...”<sup>24</sup> Thus Larkin lets Patsy know that she is above Monica in his estimation, both personally, and artistically. He obscures the issue of just *whom* he regards as the ‘other woman’, and allots Patsy a position she can be comfortable with: the *status quo* is preserved.

In a matter of days, he is writing to Winifred in a more blatant attempt to secure her attention. He begins by saying that she should “picture” him “in a small bed”, and although he does not add anything overtly erotic (Winifred would perhaps have been shocked), he does say later, in a different context:

You know I can never say no: the less I want a thing the harder it is to refuse ...

And further on:

Oh! how I regret this separation! ‘Old friends one can spare with equanimity, but to be parted from a new friend is quite intolerable.’ (O. Wilde)<sup>25</sup>

It is highly ironic that he should quote Wilde to a woman, but clearly Larkin is setting Winifred up to believe that he loves her best, and that the more he refuses to commit to her, the more he really loves her. This is a line calculated to keep her at his disposal, but to leave him uncommitted. Winifred had absolutely no idea that he was having an affair with Patsy at this time.<sup>26</sup> That Larkin ‘upped the pace’ and made it very difficult for Winifred (who was very fond of him, if not exactly in love) to keep to her plans to leave Belfast and marry her fiancé, is well documented, and she seems to represent the photograph album where what was ‘loved and lost’ is recorded. By the time the poem is written Winifred is gone, and she, too, is part of the past where her photographs and Larkin’s memory of his own gaze now belong.

The loss of Winifred gives Larkin grounds to feel he has 'been through the mill' to emotional maturity, and proves to him that, artistically speaking, he does not need a partner, but an absent beloved. After she has been textualised as photographs and as poems, Winifred is shelved in the archives.

Larkin wrote in a similar way to Maeve, just as she was about to go to Germany for a holiday, gently warning her that she should avoid entanglement with other men; and he hints that he is waiting for her to return (so that he can further their relationship?):

I wish you weren't going off among the Huns - *who won the war?* - but there, I shall just have to be patient. Don't get mixed up with any foreign bears ... <sup>27</sup>

At first glance this seems romantic and cute, but Larkin is sending Maeve some rather disturbing and confusing messages. His reference to the war reminds her that he is on the winning side while the Germans are a nation of losers. Without making overt reference to their relationship, Larkin has implied that Maeve will be out of her depth with German men, that she would be better off with him, that he will miss her, and that if he is patient (which he says he will be) she will return not so much home, as to *him*. In addition, he has represented her as a teddy bear -- a toy known for softness and (through AA Milne and others) for lack of capacity for independent thought. What he is waiting for, he implies, is a cuddle, because that is what children do with their teddy bears. But an adult female may well read more into these words when they are uttered by the man she regards as (or hopes will become) her boyfriend. The implied cuddle is a promise of safety, cherishing and affection, and contact that is potentially (but not sinfully or necessarily) sexual. This would appeal to Maeve's own ambivalence about sexual activity outside of marriage,

disguising the implication that, as a toy, she may be cast aside. That he is on holiday with Monica when writing this is something that Maeve might be aware of, but it is a point he seeks to blur.

At times, Larkin writes to inform a book/woman that she has been ‘cancelled’, or that her term as an inter-library loan is expired. For instance, Patsy ‘belongs’ to her husband, but Larkin has had access to her by virtue of Patsy’s own volition. This has not been an official inter-library arrangement, but a subterfuge by which Larkin has been allowed to access material that is neither under his librarianship, nor to which he might rightly request access. He is at least a little uncomfortable with this arrangement, and when she and her husband go to Newcastle, Larkin writes:

I didn’t mean that ‘if I came to England it bloody well wouldn’t be to see you’! as perhaps (to judge from what you replied) it may have sounded as if I did. NO: apart from some trepidation about getting nabbed by some unexpected visitor, I have a feeling that if circumstances that brought us together have now parted us, this time to your satisfaction and to some extent at your direction, then it’s ill-advised for you to try to ride both horses at once ... Further, as you know I expect, if a ‘wrong’ thing becomes harder to do, it seems wronger in consequence and - well, we have our obligations.<sup>28</sup>

Patsy has exercised her own volition again, and that is Larkin’s first objection. His second objection -- that she has “obligations” -- would appear to have gained ground that is predicated on the first objection. That he refers to her duty to her husband is obvious, but Patsy is *still* married rather than just married. Larkin’s third objection -- that a “harder to do” action is “wronger” -- is surely mere self-justification. The very circumstance that made Patsy safely unavailable as a marriage partner is now used against her, but the implication that her new location is just too inconvenient for him shines through. After all, why consult the Newcastle

archives when there is plenty of material on hand in Belfast? Patsy has no new “obligations”, but nevertheless she is dismissed. Larkin, it would seem, gets away with this flawed argument and does not talk about his own obligations. Most of the potentially distressing elements (for Larkin) inherent in this interchange are defused by the medium of communication: the letter.

Naturally, these letters are more complex than those originating in libraries and referring to actual books: Larkin’s book/women are sophisticated, talking, thinking beings that can call a librarian to account for omissions or inconsistencies. These women/books then, have some knowledge of social contract, and can expect their librarian to “do it back” thus fulfilling certain social obligations towards them that do not normally form part of library procedures. But there is another kind of catalogue that Larkin kept -- a “card” index:

It formed part of a private game which required him to write the names of women he knew along the top of a sheet of paper, and parts of the female body down the side: tits, cunt, belly etc. On the grid covering the centre of the paper he made crosses, linking the names with the nouns wherever (and by precisely what means we cannot be sure) he had scored.<sup>29</sup>

Although Motion stops short of saying so, the implication is that this list is inclusive rather than exclusive, indicating that the tendency is to regard women as sex-objects that can be captured textually, body part by body part, through real or imagined contact with, and/or analysis of, the body parts themselves. Larkin would not be the first to have kept a log of his sexual encounters,<sup>30</sup> but that the log itself is part of a sexual exercise or game, and the idea that at least some of the women on the list may have been unaware of his appropriation of their names and body parts,



imposes a different perspective on the matter. Clearly, Larkin liked to be in a position to take advantage of women without having to reciprocate.

The woman in the strongest position to expect Larkin to exert himself on her behalf is his mother, Eva Larkin. Larkin complains about his duty to his mother, but he writes, phones, and visits at frequent and predictable intervals, more than fulfilling his obligations, especially after the death of her husband. Motion notes a change in tone in his letters to her at this time:

As soon as Eva became a widow, Larkin changed the tone in which he spoke to her. While Sydney had been alive Larkin had written eagerly, jokily and (except about Ruth) openly to his parents....After his father's death his letters to his mother become fuggy. 'Dearest Old Creature', he calls her, or 'Dearest Mop' ...<sup>31</sup>

Larkin's love for Eva is sincere, but she is demanding and he dances attendance on her, adding accompanying her away on regular holidays to his already regular contact. At least some of this giving of time and attention is onerous, and that it continues implies that she has a heightened significance for him.

Motion sees the "fuggy" quality in Larkin's letters to his mother as "consoling" to Eva, and notes that although close association with her often causes Larkin to become irritated, furious, or bored, their relationship is "indispensable to his work.... [because] the ties which bound her to her son were not merely comforting but inspirational."<sup>32</sup> As he experiences the grief of losing his father and the added responsibilities that fall to his lot, she certainly becomes a focus for his misery. As Larkin himself connects his misery to the "daffodils" of romantic inspiration, Motion may well be right about Eva's inspirational qualities. To Wordsworth, the daffodils were something of beauty that could be captured in art, and kept in the mind to be recalled at will. The pleasure of the original sight is like a

moment of epiphany -- the leisured contemplation, like a facility for prayer -- or a recipe for the solitary experiencing of the sublime. Eva Larkin's importance is at least partly due to her role as a direct connection with Sydney and the grief she and her son share: she is, in herself, not only a precious archive of memories about Sydney, but, as his wife, his representative and a spiritual focus. It is as if, after his father dies, Larkin becomes the keeper of the temple with responsibility for the well-being of the high priestess, his mother. There is an almost priest-like perseverance: although she exasperates and infuriates him, Larkin cannot curtail his visits, and he exhibits a compulsion -- reminiscent of the determination displayed in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins -- to remain faithful regardless of the personal cost.

Eva is also Christ-like because she remains on this earth to offer artistic salvation after the father has become unreachable. As a text, then, Eva might represent a work wherein a code for living, along with all its self-supporting belief systems, is set out, a system of—"musts" and "do nots", a Bible, where commandments and attitudes Larkin absorbed at an early age are recorded. Eva embodies the family tree that might be recorded on the fly-leaf of the family Bible, providing both an historical archive of almost everything to do with the poet's past, and a philosophy or dogma for living that is complex enough to afford (conveniently) contradictory readings. If the role of poetry is, as Larkin has said, to preserve, then Eva is his personal English epic, and in her role as a spiritual or philosophical standard, she facilitates and sanctions almost any action he decides to take.

Motion also notes that after his father died Larkin began drawing animal motifs on the letters, depicting himself as "a whiskery seal-like animal wearing a

muffler". In this way he portrays himself as toy-like, and he "signs off as her 'Creature'",<sup>33</sup> as if she were his maker. In a sense, she *is* his maker. Not only is she his mother, but she is a living link to the father, who "did it all" and without whom the Larkins were "nobody".<sup>34</sup> Larkin's father "managed and directed Larkin's mind", but was not directed by his son. When he died Larkin lacked the strategies to direct himself; and the writer's block he suffered in 1948 can be attributed to Sydney Larkin's death, although Larkin was never able to make this connection.<sup>35</sup> Sydney Larkin was seldom, if ever, textualised by his son. In the elegy "An April Sunday brings the snow" (*CP* 21), Larkin merely records memories of his father that reach him through the tactile and visual dimension of pots of "jam [he] made of fruit" -- three dimensional, sweet and nutritious, with good keeping qualities. The son never achieved, or sought to achieve, the kind of control that would have allowed him to textualise his father.

But Larkin's devotion to his mother also has a strong utilitarian element: he is well aware of what his share of the dividends is likely to be. Motion notes that devotion to Eva was "more than a respectable excuse for dodging the frightening or complicated things in his life",<sup>36</sup> and one complication that can be kept at bay by devotion to a semi-dependent mother is marriage. In addition, as first attendant-in-waiting to the high-priestess of his own creation, Larkin is able to claim some authority of his own. The artistic inspiration and the link to Sydney are provided by the mother/goddess, but, as the son/priest and poet, it is Larkin who carries her immortality rather than she who can offer it to him. She, too, has a vested interest in keeping him near. This manifests itself as a demand that he keep writing, responding, and calling frequently. As a son, he is nothing if not devout. After a

holiday with Monica, immediately followed by a holiday with his mother, it is his mother to/about whom he writes in his poems.<sup>37</sup> His artistic creativity is directed towards his spiritual centre, and is not in dispute. But he takes this a step further when he demonstrates a need to appease her. In his reply to his mother's advice to drop Monica and spend more time with Maeve:

“I have built her,” Larkin told Eva at the start of 1961, “in my own image and made her dependent on me, and now I can't abandon her.”<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, the Larkins' feeling of superiority noted by Monica<sup>39</sup> was rather more comprehensive than she had thought. Larkin takes on a God-like position in respect of Monica: she is “in” his “image”, but not exactly like him. Even if she has ‘free will’, this is circumscribed because she is “dependent on” him, and (like other mortals) she cannot become divine, but has the right to instigate her own fall.

At the very least, she is her creator's instrument, and Monica might be likened to a pen, or a diary. But this would imply that she is not ‘finished’, and that Larkin would be constantly writing her. This idea is upheld by the vast correspondence they shared, and by the fact that they spent some of their time together either inventing a rabbit-language, or rewriting or overwriting established texts. That Monica was able to help in this suggests that she is a ‘finished’ text, and that it is Larkin's cataloguing self that is dominant because he consults her again and again. In this case, then, Monica functions as a reference text -- a dictionary or an encyclopedia. Clearly, she is indispensable to him. Larkin was prepared to manipulate Monica and lie to her in order to ensure her availability,<sup>40</sup> and there is no evidence to suggest that he was prepared to share her with other men. In spite of his mother's disapproval, she is kept in his reference library.

On the other hand, Monica can also be likened to a work where the reader can lose his or her self or seek replenishment in the comfort of the familiar. She is a book one might well take on holiday, in which is depicted a world that is different, but from which one might also wish to emerge. She offers adventure and safety, and to some extent is like a novel, biography or travel book. Some of the textual games she and Larkin play have erotic overtones, and might be likened to the pornographic magazines that Larkin enjoyed. But he has also associated leisure time and eroticism with cataloguing and words. Even in this, however, it is her value as an aid to the crosswords that dominates. One other implication is that it is Monica's intellect that he values.

This supports the idea that it was Maeve, more than anyone, who "kept alive for him the sense that ... he might be married".<sup>41</sup> She represented a fantasy of "innocence" and "vulnerability" in a way that made Larkin feel he could be a knight in shining armour for her, and in a way, she is his romance and myth kitty of courtly and classical belief. She also represents the fairy tale with the happy ending. Her position is ethereal, encompassing artistic inspiration, impossible ideals, a just-out-of-reach quality that mists over and escapes as it is grasped, and a belief in happy and successful endings that can never quite render their process to reasoned examination. Like the stories of the *Arabian Nights*, or the *Golden Bough*, there is an element of magic, of the unexplained and inexplicable surrounding her. There is also an element of secrecy. Although it was an open secret around Hull that they were seeing each other, "they had to avoid scandal", and avoid doing anything that might alert Monica to their continued relationship.<sup>42</sup> Unlike Monica, Maeve is not a text to be taken on holiday, or even displayed to local academia.

This is because she is not a *bona fide* academic text. On one occasion when he and Maeve went together to see a performance of “Larkinland” at the University of Hull, Larkin deserted his date in order to attend a formal after-show function at the Staff Club. That she was not to accompany him came as a complete surprise to Maeve, and outside the hall where the performance had taken place,

Maeve told him he had made a choice about his life without acknowledging it. He had decided that Monica was his companion, not her. Larkin did not disagree, and they went their separate ways -- Larkin turning in to the celebration of his work while Maeve, angry and distressed, drove home with another university colleague.<sup>43</sup>

That Maeve assumes that Larkin would happily have taken Monica to such an event suggests that, deep-down, she knows her place in his affections, but it is unlikely that she realised that, because Larkin had stopped writing by this time (November, 1974), he had no further use for her inspirational potential. It can be no coincidence that this time he makes only a half-hearted attempt to salvage the relationship, and readily agrees to part. Larkin has no further need of inspiration, and he abandons Maeve as if she were a cancelled library-book. His mother is also dead by this time, and he has no need to retain her as a buffer for himself between his mother and her dislike of Monica.

There are, then, interesting parallels between the way Larkin treats books, and the way he treats some people, especially women. He sites himself in a god-like relationship at times, and there is no doubt that this is stressful for him. It is significant that he collapses and is hospitalised at the time when he is confronted with the difficulties of conducting, simultaneously, relationships with both Maeve and Monica (both women are unhappy with the situation) and secretly conducting an

affair with his secretary. His own lack of self-awareness is reflected in the fact that although he said that he thought he ought to marry Monica, and at the same time wanted to marry Maeve, it is Monica he turns to during his illness.<sup>44</sup>

The library-related skills that Larkin refines outside the workplace coincide with common cultural practices or reinforce his already well-developed sense of self-interest, giving him ways to form hierarchical power structures that make his chosen stance secure. Nevertheless, Larkin is, to some extent, shaped and limited in his actions and epistemology by the need to function within the library environment (at work) and the library-like nature of the relationships he constructs. This exacerbates his tendency to construct people as texts and to regard these textual representations as more satisfactory than actual people, yet when he is the one who is to be scripted, he writes to discredit the text. This suggests that at some level of consciousness he knows what he is doing to those he writes.

Duffy, on the other hand, keeps texts more clearly separated from the people she represents, and there is no evidence to suggest that she projects text-like qualities onto people outside her writing: she sees text as a path to memory, but does not portray writing as more satisfactory than real life. Her biographer is confused and is in danger of losing his identity to that of his subject; but, unlike Larkin, she is well aware of his dilemma, and avoids confusing her identity with that of the biographer by having him work on a subject that is obviously not herself. Whether or not she seeks an eventual documentation of her life and works, she is aware that this is not the real person she is. Her explorations of language and the liquid nature of the meaning contained in language make her cautious, and, because there are no

final answers, may ultimately leave her only as ‘undeceived’ as Larkin himself; but it is clear that she is aware that what she reveals as a trap for others may also be a trap for her. In addition, her frequent references to photographs, drawings, and headlines indicate that she seeks to perform, rather than avoid, social duty, and she does not conflate these visual representations with the people they represent. When the people in her poetry come close to doing this themselves, she reveals their dysfunction to the reader. In contrast, Larkin’s preference for text and abhorrence for social duty are so compelling that sometimes he seeks to make the real people in his life conform to his image of the perfect text while playing the part of custodian, at least as far as their mutual relationship is concerned. He strives to see parts of life in terms of absolutes (perhaps because they are easy to categorise), and formulates a system of rigid stereotypes by extrapolation from selected information only. These stereotypes are then held in stasis by Larkin’s refusal to accommodate other or new data, and tend, therefore, to be not only inappropriate and inaccurate, but frequently illogical, with their main support emanating from a system of arbitrary value judgements that do not need to be consistent. That Duffy writes to discredit this process suggests that, although Larkin takes this behaviour to extremes, it is not a behaviour that is out of kilter with the rest of his society, but that, on the contrary, it was, and is still, a common practice for the acquisition of (apparent) positions of power.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, “The Real Wilfred” in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983, 231). Hereafter this text is referred to as *RW*.

<sup>2</sup> *RW*, 233.

<sup>3</sup> *Life*, xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Motion quotes this in *Life* (xviii-xix), and records that Larkin said this in conversation with the poet Richard Murphy after “Posterity” had been published.



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<sup>5</sup> *Life*, xix.

<sup>6</sup> *Life*, xix.

<sup>7</sup> *Life*, xvii.

<sup>8</sup> This was said in conversation at the “New Larkins For Old” conference, Hull, 1997. Winifred also said that many of these photographs that were deemed not suitable for her to see were of Monica Jones.

<sup>9</sup> Strangely, after his death, this is exactly what happened. Maeve Brennan, Winifred Dawson, and Monica Jones all spent time together, and Maeve and Winifred have become friends. Maeve has interviewed Winifred for *About Larkin* (no 1 1996, pp.11-15), the newsletter of the Philip Larkin Society.

<sup>10</sup> *Life*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters*, 427.

<sup>12</sup> Mentioned at the “New Larkins for Old” conference, Hull, England, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Johnson, in a paper entitled “New and Old Correspondence”, given to the “New Larkins for Old” conference, Hull, England, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> *Life*, 142.

<sup>15</sup> *Letters*, 274.

<sup>16</sup> *Letters*, 270.

<sup>17</sup> *Life*, 222.

<sup>18</sup> *Life*, 222.

<sup>19</sup> *Life*, 234.

<sup>20</sup> E. M. Cioran, (translated by Richard Howard), “Epistolary Mania” (in *The Literary Review* vol 30, Spring 1987, 418-19).

<sup>21</sup> *Letters*, 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Letters*, 194.

<sup>23</sup> *Letters*, 194.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters*, 201-2.

<sup>25</sup> *Letters*, 203-4.

<sup>26</sup> Mentioned in conversation with the writer at the “Old Larkins for New” conference, June 1997.

<sup>27</sup> *Letters*, 344.

<sup>28</sup> *Letters*, 217.

<sup>29</sup> *Life*, 221.

<sup>30</sup> For one such record see the Diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, or *Unequal Relationships: An Historical Enquiry into Master-Slave Relations as featured in the Journals of Thomas Thistlewood*, a thesis by R. Michael Peck, University of Canterbury, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> *Life*, 177.

<sup>32</sup> *Life*, 177-8.

<sup>33</sup> *Life*, 177

<sup>34</sup> *Life*, 175. Larkin’s sister, Kitty, made this remark after the funeral, and Larkin repeated it, with his endorsement, to Sutton.

<sup>35</sup> *Life*, 180-1.

<sup>36</sup> *Life*, 178.

<sup>37</sup> *Life*, 230.

<sup>38</sup> Larkin’s correspondence with his mother, 1 January, 1961, cited in *Life*, 310.

<sup>39</sup> *Life*, 230.

<sup>40</sup> *Life*, 310.

<sup>41</sup> *Life*, 472.

<sup>42</sup> *Life*, 472.

<sup>43</sup> *Life*, 471-2.

<sup>44</sup> *Life*, 312.

## Chapter 3

### Love Story

#### Part I: Larkin's Dangerous Liaisons

Philip Larkin displays an over-reliance on his library skills, such as categorisation, as a means to understanding. This affects his relationships because he imposes a sense of plot on those close to him and seems to expect a degree of control, as if he were able to have a hand in scripting their lives. His belief in his ability to do this is possibly based on another belief: that there is a basic code of life that may be found if only all information can be gathered, stored and interpreted correctly. This can be seen as a kind of information “paranoia”,<sup>1</sup> and seems to have fed a tendency in Larkin to listen only selectively to his inner voices. Because of this faithfulness to the holy grail of the perfect decision, he fails to examine fully the idea that normal living involves him in responsibilities toward more than one person at a time, and that moral conflict is, therefore, inevitable.<sup>2</sup> He disapproves of those around him who, in his opinion, have compromised, making harsh comment on their relationships and on the idea of relationships in general.

One of the most blatant examples of Larkin's anger towards those who do not conform to his system must be “Self's the Man” (*CP* 117), where he agonises over the issue of whether it is more selfish to marry or to remain single. He is unable to quantify selfishness, however, and concludes that both paths are equally selfish because he and Arnold have each taken the path that seemed easier. But Larkin feels that by choosing to remain single he has reneged on his obligations to society: although regarding Arnold as blameworthy allows Larkin to feel better, this is only because he is less alone in his guilt. Collusion does not constitute absolution: and as the poem reveals no sign of acceptance of unavoidable moral dilemma, much of the associated stress surrounding the perceived selfishness remains.

Larkin reaches the obvious conclusion that he would have been selfish to marry just for the sake of home comforts knowing, as he did, that he would resent the restrictions marriage would place on his time. His pre-conceived notions, however -- particularly that he has a social duty to marry, that his idea of marriage is the only one, and that his views on women and marriage are common to all men -- prevents him from an empathetic view of the lives of others, and he fails to perceive possible advantages, such as enrichment and inspiration. Clearly, he is angry with men (as well as with women) who undermine his chosen position. This means that it is justification for his single status that is really the motivation for his attack on Arnold and his wife: Larkin is not genuinely seeking solutions, so that the poem's ending, rather than implying irony, "imposes severe limits on the extent to which ... lifestyles can be transformed", revealing that his strategy is "to deflect such considerations into the realm of the unknown and the insoluble."<sup>3</sup>

To uphold his views Larkin gives Arnold's wife a nasty, domineering voice, and himself a voice that speaks the ultimate and superior truth of "knowing what [he] can stand". Arnold, however, is deprived of any voice at all, thus avoiding the need for Larkin to risk having to alter his precious prejudice or endanger the male comradeship of women-hating. Arnold never has a chance to reveal whether he really believes that women are the downfall of all men. Nor does the reader have any way of assessing Arnold's attitude to his marriage from within the poem. Motion says the poem's "immediate impetus was the wish [of Larkin] to deride his deputy librarian/..." who is the Arnold of the poem, and that this poem is not an accurate description of this marriage.<sup>4</sup> The idea that Arnold is a real person, with a real marriage, makes things look even worse for Larkin; and if any further proof of his rigidity is needed it exists in his use of the "same wearily unhappy voice"<sup>5</sup> he had used over the years in poems about commitment to others.

As usual, the poem is constructed to allow Larkin to appear fair and good because (he asserts) his self-knowledge is deeper and more reliable than Arnold's,

and because (having proved his case) he includes “I suppose” as a disclaimer in the last line. This not only saves him from the charges of being “know-it-all” and “unscientific,” but acts as a token admission that he might be wrong. Because it is merely a token, however, the overall effect is to assert the truth of the poem whilst obliterating the need to examine properly the facts or the reasoning. In effect, it is Larkin, not Arnold’s wife, who is the cause of Arnold’s emasculation: and it is this emasculation that renders Arnold as text with a plot Larkin can control. It would seem that the incompatibility of Larkin’s beliefs about himself and others, and his observations and experiences of actual life, leads him to confuse the self-preservation that kept him single with the selfishness that kept him accepting the ministrations of his mother (and others) without ‘doing it back’. The resulting paradox is that he often experiences feelings of guilt when he does what he feels he must to protect himself, yet feels justified when he (seemingly deliberately) hurts others. That these two circumstances are frequently concurrent indicates the extent of his confusion.

Larkin writes, in a letter to Patsy Strang, that he is a “good deal worried by art (writing) & life (M.M.B.J.)”;<sup>6</sup> and “Reasons for Attendance” (*CP* 80), written in the same year, shows that he is also worried about himself. In the poem Larkin watches the dancers, who are “all under twenty-five”, and envies them their youth. He feels he has missed the (relationship) boat, and has regrets, yet tries to celebrate what he sees as his superior self-sufficiency by simultaneously applauding his own maturity. He observes that the dancers move “Solemnly on the beat of happiness”, but immediately calls the veracity of his observation into question when he compares “The wonderful feel of girls” with the “lifted, rough-tongued bell” of art. This can hardly be a direct comparison, for the line of thought traces a path indirectly through his mistrust of love to his (now somewhat infamous) view that sex is better, cheaper and quicker, in the self-service lane. At the same time Larkin implies that relationships are both unsatisfying and redundant. This double

denunciation of “couples” is based on an incomplete assessment of a conveniently selective set of data, and serves to uphold morally Larkin’s own single lifestyle while preserving his sexuality without the visible social convention of marriage, or the biological issue of children. He presents himself as self-sufficient, yet in some sort of oral/aural sexual arrangement sanctified by art, in partnership with the “rough-tongued bell” of this favourite authority. Although this is a speaking/hearing relationship that is reciprocal, it is no ordinary “face to flushed face” arrangement, as the faceless bell merely speaks, but does not listen. Larkin wants to please the bell, which is, therefore, in a more powerful position, and need not heed Larkin. Conversely, Larkin’s position is more akin to that of the dancing women (who are in patriarchal, heterosexual relationships) than he chooses to acknowledge. Larkin may listen and speak, but the bell will only resonate when what he says is of a wave length with its own fundamental tone. Like Larkin, the bell is a selective listener, responding only to what it already knows.

By calling on Art to partner him in life, Larkin seeks to shore up his masculinity with his writing and to fulfil an unacknowledged androgynous function that he sees as allowing him the best of both art and sex, but without the encumbrance of commitment. Freedom from encumbrance, however, is an illusion, because he is committed to his own ideal of art. He is married to a phantom that he can neither grasp nor fully define, but which demands that he constantly strive to do so. Thus, like the women in Duffy’s “Litany” (*MT* 9) who, by their silence, reinforce the *status quo* that places strictures on their own lives, he must use established forms in order to speak in the presence of this higher authority. Vernacular and swearing -- ‘bad’ language -- are set in the concrete of canonical form that acts as a container for unwanted ideas, delineating and limiting in much the same way as a plot circumscribes a narrative.

Larkin’s struggle to maintain belief in the empirical nature of some of his most cherished prejudices in the face of evidence to the contrary is particularly noticeable

in his unchanging attitude to women. This in turn allows him to fix his cultural identity in his own ideal of the male of his society, and discount cultural aspects he sees as feminine. His use of 'bad' language can also be seen as an invoking of the unfeminine in order to assert the masculine.<sup>7</sup> Such selective cultural attachment is not unusual, and it would seem that the circumstances surrounding a post-war society provide a greater than usual need for such practices.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, an upsurge in the level of misogyny sanctioned and practised, or indeed demanded, at such times, allows men to retain their blameless home-from-the-war hero status while exonerating them from responsibility for the abysmal conditions resulting from the war. Women take the blame via the invention or promotion of the myth that women are harmful to men, and this is fed by recent painful memories that it is women and babies who have been treated as indispensable in wartime, and men who have been dispensable.<sup>9</sup>

Women provide a convenient scapegoat for the ambivalent feelings surrounding war. It would be unpatriotic, and therefore unthinkable, to blame the state, as this would not only imply an unjust war and needless death, but demote the soldier from defender of the realm to dupe of the realm. The idea of the nation as superior is linked to the idea of the male as superior. That Larkin, as much as anyone, wishes to preserve this status is evident in his poem "Homage to a Government," where he bemoans that

Next year we shall be living in a country  
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.  
The statues will be standing in the same  
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.  
Our children will not know it's a different country.  
All we can hope to leave them now is money (*CP*  
171).

That he should express concern for future generations in this way is particularly interesting when we consider that Larkin neither liked children nor wished for children of his own, and that he hoarded his own money. It is not the losses of war, but a loss of what he considers to be honourable status that hurts Larkin.

War has traditionally (if temporarily) forced women into a more prominent position in the work-force. This has left men returning from war with the feeling that their place has been usurped: that not only were they dispensable in war, but that having gone to war, they were, in a sense, already dead to the society they sought to defend. This feeling, no doubt, is exacerbated by the male tendency to define the self in terms of occupation. As the gap between women's work and men's work narrows, there is increased need to elevate the male self, or the patriarchy will be destabilised, and possibly collapse, posing a serious loss of authority for those who build their cultural identity on this foundation.

Although Larkin did not go to war and, therefore, had no need to compensate for the horrors of the trenches or to fear the loss of his place in the work-force, he was severely affected by all this. The post-war, masculinised-hero status of the soldier was his only by a tenuous association afforded by his personal male status. Joining with men against the new enemy -- woman -- gave him the opportunity he needed to strengthen this. His early, unpublished attempts at fiction were ambivalent -- "disparaging about women," but also showing "excitement at the thought of them."<sup>10</sup> This pre-war participation in the current misogynist discourse gave him a head start, and all that was needed was a consolidation, or strengthening of a position he had already mastered. Later, by the use of pornography, Larkin textualised women in a way that allowed him to elevate sex, but to exclude actual women. He justified this by regarding sex as "'too good' for the tainted real world".<sup>11</sup> This ideology might have been a little difficult for some people -- particularly his sex-partners -- to swallow; but because misogynist material has, historically, not been a bar to art being accepted and acclaimed, the idea would have been difficult to refute. Larkin flaunted these attitudes "not simply ... in his daily life ... [but also in] gruffly comic terms which most people tolerated, enjoyed, or took to be characterful," and he frequently couched his views as complaints about the lack of sex (even when he and Monica were sexually active together) and the

cost of dating.<sup>12</sup> This process is part of his stratagem for giving credence to the idea that women take, but give nothing, an idea that occurs repeatedly in his poetry.

In "Poetry of Departures" (CP 85, 1954) Larkin mentally rehearses the scenario of "[walking] out on the whole crowd", but never reaches the conclusion that he could not escape responsibility this way as he would take his enormous commitments to himself and to art with him. Nor does it occur to him that the only responsibilities he might dodge would be those he accepts in the present, some of which are owed to himself. Perhaps this is why the idea of abdication gives a similar sensation to lashing out at an anonymous "*bastard*". The latter is physical violence, but the former would be social violence, and here the poet's confusion takes an ugly turn because both ideas have the same effect on him as the idea that "*she undid her dress*". Sex and violence, then, are inextricably attached to the idea of the sexually active woman as the tempter of man.

Larkin asserts it is the knowledge that he can walk out, lash out, and have impersonal self-centred sexual thrills if he wishes, that "helps [him] stay/ Sober and industrious." This is a self-defeating argument, and unconvincing, because he continually demonstrates that his slavish avoidance of commitment has him as firmly trapped as any degree of married responsibility could. Certainly avoidance of commitment could be seen as a kind of abdication; masturbation and pornography could be seen as self-centred sexual thrill; and some of the poems -- "Self's the Man" for instance -- could be seen as lashing out. These substitutes or parallels, however, are as close as Larkin ever gets to what he says he knows he can do if he chooses. The last stanza of "Poetry of Departures" consists of a weak excuse for remaining just as he is. He hides the artificiality of his chosen path by making it seem natural in comparison to a deliberately shaped life that is itself a "Reprehensibly perfect" art object.

The reprehensibility of perfection in art is at variance here with Larkin's own *del?* aspirations. Chinese ceramics are moulded, and books are written; but both items he



holds up as “Reprehensibly perfect” are fashioned by people who, like himself, are artists. Larkin seems to be intimating not only that there is only one perfection, but also that there is one correct artistic vision. Furthermore, it would seem that he alone fully comprehends these. He demonstrates, however, that it is only safe for him to struggle for perfection when the safety net of impossibility is in place. What Larkin has is a rigid stereotype of art: an acceptance of a narrow or faulty vision which he maintains by selective blindness.

“Poetry of Departures” gains a proportion of its impact from stereotypes of sex, violence and abdication of social responsibility. These are common themes, often glamorised in film and literature, and such works are usually essentially escapist, allowing the readers to relax concerns in their own lives and identify with success for a while. In “A Study of Reading Habits” (*CP* 131), Larkin looks back on a time when reading allowed him to live vicarious fantasies very like these. Now, however, the magic is lost, and he has become the anti-hero “Who lets the girl down before / The hero arrives”; the coward “Who’s yellow”; the nameless minor player who “keeps the store”. Not only does he fail in “getting / The fame and the girl and the money / All at one sitting” (*CP* 90), but he questions his own potential to maintain his self-respect. Fantasy, by its very nature, need not relate directly to real life. This poem, however, indicates a strengthening of the safety net of failure that makes perfection impossible, and makes striving after it safe and moral. This works against the use of fantasy as a system of pretend, an escapist suspension of belief in the real world that allows another to take its place temporarily. Larkin seems to have lost not so much an ability to fantasise, but an actual belief in the real-life power of fantasy. He has caught a glimpse of what lies beyond the gaps in his dogma; and, because he is not prepared to examine the inconsistency, he is forced to avoid an explanation. He is left vaguely uncomfortable about himself and his achievements, and as confused as ever about human relationships. This shift in

position is not consistent with a more mature attitude that sees fiction and fact as distinct, but represents a tightening of rigidity of attitude.

Larkin's narrow definitions of himself, art, and the price men pay to have relationships with women do not seem to have altered as he grew older, and there is no sign of his gaining self-knowledge of a kind that might lead to a more enabling attitude. There is evidence to suggest, however, that despite a fear of love, most men over the age of about thirty-five feel more strongly the need to seek relationships that are loving as well as sexual.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that there should be a change in Larkin's attitude to relationships, to women, to commitment, and to his own sexuality, some time in the decade from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s.

In "Maiden Name" (*CP* 101), written in 1955, Larkin writes about the marriage of Winifred Arnott<sup>14</sup> as a state of being "thankfully confused / By law with someone else," and uses the maiden name to symbolise a relationship that includes himself. There is a residual or ongoing aspect to his and Winifred's relationship, for he says the "old name", although it is now "disused" and "applicable to no one," "shelters our faithfulness". Larkin may be playing with words here, using "no one" to mean "two." The "faithfulness," too, is something of an enigma. Is Larkin implying that this was a serious, honest relationship; that it was monogamous while it lasted; or simply that they still think of each other affectionately? The safety net of impossibility is firmly in place, however, because the relationship is over, and he is in no personal danger by treating it as if it was a more valid and lasting commitment than the new marriage. Motion sees this poem as continuing the function of "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" by "[freezing] Winifred in her youth and available singleness".<sup>15</sup> Outside the poem the irony of Larkin's ambivalence is further complicated when he privately follows this poem up with a couplet: "Not love you? Dear, I'd pay ten quid for you: / Five down, and five when I got rid of you".<sup>16</sup>

Clearly Larkin is still “Counting” (*CP* 108) a couple as an entity of one dominant and one submerged individual, with little mutual respect or mutual interests in life:

counting up to two  
Is harder to do;  
For one must be denied  
Before it's tried.

And three years later, in “The Whitsun Weddings” (*CP* 114-6) he is still counting, contemplating with contempt “A dozen marriages”.

The “Whitsun Weddings” made formless “noise” inviting a contrast with the ringing music of the “rough-tongued bell” of art in “Reasons for Attendance” which “speaks” for him “With happiness”. The weddings, as a genus, are “like a happy funeral” with a dark “secret” for women; but there is something even more ominous about their “happening in the shade,” especially for the men, who dismiss them as “farcical”. Larkin sees the women as happy with their role; the men, however, are shown as bemused. “An uncle shouting smut” calls the men’s attention to the obvious gain of sex on demand -- an advantage that might not stack up against the disadvantages if the shady weddings were examined in the sun. It is the women, not the men, who are shown as getting what they want; and these men are like the soldiers who, returning from war, have lost their place to women. Larkin was rejected for service in the war because he was too short-sighted, and here he uses another kind of short-sightedness to ensure his own ineligibility for marriage while guarding against loss of face. It is apt, then, that in “The Whitsun Weddings” the men appear not as victorious heroes, but as vanquished shadows of their own glorious potential: prisoners of a war waged by women.

In “Self’s the Man”, established marriage is having to do what you are told. Not only does the wife order the husband about, but she issues a specific order to “*Put a screw in this wall*”, showing that it is she, not he, who has the say over the use of his phallic energy. She is unmoved by and unresponsive to his lovemaking, and uncaring for him as an individual. She directs Arnold’s actions, selecting the

particular wall for him to work on: in a sense, she is the wall. Arnold has been enticed and entrapped by her use of her sexuality, and now, in the security of marriage, it is not soft femininity she offers him, but impenetrable, imprisoning boundaries that limit (rather than engender) not only sexual, but also artistic opportunity.

It is a short mental step from the idea of a “screw” in the “wall” to the ideas of ‘hole in the wall’, and ‘bolt hole’. ‘Hole in the wall’ has the meaning of a dingy place, often a place of commerce. The implication is that the economics of marriage not only advantage women, but that the business practices women use to gain this advantage are of doubtful moral value, to say the least, or, perhaps, downright dishonest. Either way, men are duped and exploited shamelessly. The shadiness of the Whitsun weddings has devolved into a dirty business. The connotations associated with ‘bolt hole’ are no better, because the very person the husband needs to fear has directed where and when the hide-out might be available. It is not a place for illicit, and therefore enjoyable, sex or art (and the two do seem to be confused at this point); for here he might hide from the rest of the world, but not from his wife -- his jailer, his anti-muse. Women, then, are not only in the business of marrying men, but of limiting, managing, and directing as well.

The mature women in “Faith Healing” (*CP* 126) are “Moustached”, suggesting they are not wholly female in spite of their “flowered frocks”, but repulsive female wolves in sheep’s clothing. They come to the meeting because of dissatisfaction with their lives, and, by implication, their husbands. The reader is left with the feeling that some of these women have never married, while others have lost, or used up, an erstwhile good man. Their plight is presented as just and sensible in view of their lack of attractiveness: they do not deserve men. The taking on of male characteristics demonstrates the power of these women to consume men, while implying that their need for men is so great that, by osmosis of association, they steal (and therefore degrade) masculinity. Being masculine in a patriarchal

society is, after all, being what women are not. To show these women are merely pseudo-men locked in flawed female form, Larkin attributes to them belief in the power of “all they might have done had they been loved”, and implies that they are mistaken. Are these the same “moustached archaic faces” of “MCMXIV” (*CP* 127), the very next poem in the collection? Here, too, some utopian ideal has been lost, and the poet is unable to escape the feeling that “The thousands of marriages” can only “[Last] a little while longer”. This poem depersonalises marriage by the inflation of numbers to represent not contracts of couples, but the doom of a whole community: the “one” that had to “be denied” in “Counting” was much more personal -- even the dozen “Whitsun Weddings” involved separate couples. Regan (1992) states that

The steady enumeration of detail in “MCMXIV”  
creates an effect of impressions gathered at second  
hand from a sepia photograph,<sup>17</sup>

implying that Larkin has succeeded in distancing himself, by several layers of remove, from his own debate so that he stands as guru to the married masses. In “Poetry of Departures” the “fifth-hand” “epitaph” was thrilling in spite of being merest hearsay. In the same way, the idea of marriage is scary, even when it is as impersonal, remote, and safely in the past as a “second hand” impression.

Marriage can hardly be desirable to men if “women are, or ... / / Seem to be: synthetic, new, / And natureless” as they are described in “The Large Cool Store” (*CP* 135). This store is such an obvious mass production of damning evidence that it is no longer necessary to discredit the institution of marriage. Marriage cannot work because all women tend toward falseness. They seduce men with philistine nylon frillies, and that leads to consumer plenty rather than artistic individuation. These women have moved from a ‘hole in the wall’ to a larger, more overtly corporate operation, with stronger connotations of mass production, commerce, deception, and dirty money. They collude with the philistine, commercial element that early twentieth-century poets have blamed for the devaluation of art. Now

many men cannot distinguish between real art and fake art; between real women (who, if they exist, wear chaste flannel, or perhaps nothing at all in the bedroom?) and frilly, nylon, man-trap women; and this lack of ability to discriminate is the fault of women.

The women associated with the cool store would be working-class, and clearly Monica, who is a professional academic, is not an immediate member of this group. She is a woman, however, and this degree of similarity is quite enough to show she is dangerous. Perhaps this is why, in “Talking in Bed” (CP 129), the “two people” who are “Lying together” fail to be “honest”. One of them is an unnatural fake; and the other, feeling an obligation to speak “Words at once true and kind,” can have nothing to say! The use of the term “lying” alongside the term “honest” must be deliberate in a writer of Larkin’s calibre, but there is nothing to distinguish whether the ironic implications of *dishonesty* fall equally on each partner. Is Monica lying because she avoids saying that what she really wants is marriage? And is Larkin lying because he knows this is what Monica wants, but chooses not to give her an opportunity to say so while doing nothing to disillusion her about his own intractability? If Monica did not care about marriage, she almost surely cared about the monogamous nature of the relationship she had with Larkin, and about their spending time together. Larkin did not behave monogamously toward her, though, and parcelled out his time among the women in his life. In 1961, the year after he wrote “Talking in Bed,” Larkin was “Lying” to Monica about Maeve to uphold his lifestyle, and presenting Monica as his personal construction, a charity case, and his own unethical behaviour as kindness.<sup>18</sup> To say anything “at once true and kind” then, is out of the question; and to say what is “not untrue and not unkind” is not necessarily to be honest.

Although Larkin expresses regret that the poem “Breadfruit” (CP 141) has been “set up,” and refers to it as a “little squib,” it would seem to be a more honest portrayal of his perception of what is acceptable in man/woman relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Poetically, then, this poem may well be inconsequential, but in terms of understanding Larkin's work it is much more than a "little squib". Everyone in it is satirised, but, as usual, it is the women -- "ex-schoolgirls", who never grow up, and unreal, dream "girls" -- who fare worst. The idea that natural women exist only in the dreams of the boys complements the idea that marriage is an "uncorrected [vision]". This implies that the dream women are the corrected vision, and that the men are stupid to take the "ex-schoolgirls" as substitutes. Their punishment is to worry themselves into a regressive old age filled again with imaginary "naked native girls". It is the contrast between the two stereotypes of women -- real and imagined -- that is significant here. The "ex-schoolgirls" are flesh and blood women who not only punish men by marrying them, but escape responsibility and adulthood in the process. Unlike the artificial (man-made?), demanding ex-schoolgirls, however, the natives are sexually switched on, and want nothing better than to bring in the bread to feed their man. They appear out of thin air, and so have no commitments of their own. They not only take responsibility for themselves, but for the men, and would never tie a man down by expecting him to support any offspring. At any rate, such dreamlike status has a powerful contraceptive effect; and dream-fantasy (where the author has a control that is almost total) is portrayed as more rewarding than reality.

Fantasy offers more power, but it lacks the materiality, authority and conviction of a text. Thus it is texts that Larkin consistently uses to enforce the bounds of his most narrow ideas, and he has clung to the idea of pornography as being as rewarding, and less trouble, than real sexual relationships without weighing up the price of loneliness and loss of affection. Women have been possessed and controlled as photographs and poems; and weddings, viewed as moving pictures within the framework of a train window, have been written and preserved as empty and somewhat evil, so that the potential for the joyous and celebratory has been discredited. Larkin leaps from the idea of a wedding as an event directly to a long-

term result that suits his utilitarian purpose. This is a process he seems to reserve for things he wishes to avoid. If he had regarded getting drunk in this damaging light, he might well have lived longer and written more. Fantasy and its associated escapism, however, have been used to limit rather than to free his systems of thought. It is no wonder that fantasy, the ultimate in escapism, is only available in a textless world of semi-unconsciousness during extremes of youth and age when lack of self-control might be seen as normal, or excusable: times when allowing the mind free range is certain to have no consequences in reality, or to be interpreted as a weak indulgence.

“Breadfruit,” then, depicts a comfortable dream that suggests the ideal woman is uneducated and an amalgam of siren and mother -- a fantastic male ideal to which most living, breathing women would not want to aspire. Ironically, the women are melting, two into one: a kind of female marriage that makes the man necessary, yet free from commitment. The fate described as repugnant in “Counting” is not repugnant *per se*, apparently, but only when Larkin is the one who must compromise; for here the sacrificial ratio is more than two into one, but that one is male. The total submerging of any number of females is acceptable, then, but the responsibilities expected of a married man are not. Furthermore, what Larkin’s contemporary readers would not have known is now obvious. Larkin manages “the widowed mum; having to [or feeling he has to] scheme / With money; illness; age” and a kind of “absolute / Maturity” that “falls” heavily in the form of fear of failure and death -- all without the help of marriage. Certainly this poem may be read as a joke, an objective, and therefore superior, view that sees both male and female foibles. And yet, it is impossible to rule out the suggestion that Larkin felt this was how reality should be for him.

In “Wild Oats” (CP 143), dated 1962, “beautiful” is set up in opposition to the intellect of “her friend in specs” whom he “could talk to.” Larkin took the friend out, on and off, for seven years. In that time he “met beautiful twice. She



was trying / Both times (or so [he] thought) not to laugh” at him. This degree of beauty is far beyond the poet’s grasp, and the poem leaves the reader not only with the impression that it is “bosomy English rose[’s]” beauty that moves him, but that intellect and conversation are outranked by, and out of place with, love. This is reinforced in the last stanza where Larkin says he was “easily bored to love.” In real life, Larkin complains that he spent over three pounds taking her out and all he got in return was “a damp kiss in the ear”, and concludes that “It’s just not worth it”.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, why should he go to so much trouble when he can keep “beautiful” in his pocket? This photograph is no sentimental keepsake of an old friend; no aid to memory of a former time. Instead it is a piece of paper that actually replaces and surpasses an attempt to advance a relationship. The photograph’s function is a continuing one that suggests its value lies not in the preservation of the past, but in the qualitative improvement of the present. This suggests that Larkin has absorbed and retained something of the utilitarian ideal: that there is a set of actions that will provide the most tangible return for the least expenditure of time, effort and capital. Like the early twentieth-century economists, he devalues what he cannot quantify: intangibles are simply not counted.

Looking back over his almost forty years,<sup>21</sup> Larkin observes that what he has in life “isn’t at all expected or agreeable”, but that to have acted differently, he “shd [sic] have needed to have *felt* differently, to have *been* different.” He is not satisfied with his lot or without regrets, but is “still waiting for life to start,” as if all he has experienced so far has been in limbo or a waiting period. Larkin still thinks life events are “supposed to occur as a matter of course”, and that all he must do is be passive and avoid commitment so that he will be free to participate when the time comes. Even in 1966, when Larkin was well into his forties, his writing shows no appreciation of the value of mutuality that most people find in close relationships. Instead “Love” (CP 150) is still a one-way street, or perhaps two one-way streets

that tend to run in different directions. It “Is having the blind persistence / To upset an existence / Just for your own sake.” Larkin has neither the strength to resist, nor the weakness to persist blindly. He is in an ambivalent position, unable to be wholeheartedly in a relationship, yet unable to give up either his need to give and receive love, or wanting all the advantages love can bring.

Consequently, Larkin can neither stay away from “The Dance” (*CP* 154-8), nor enter into the spirit of the courting ritual. His “lack” ensures that the “qualities / Moments like this demand” are not available to him. If all that were on offer, besides dancing, were “Drink, sex and jazz”, however, there would be no problem. Rather than acknowledge the social obligations of commitment that might arise for him if he follows his feelings, Larkin persuades himself this is a combination he cannot appreciate. Again he escapes by classifying his feelings as predominantly sexual. His partner’s “whole consenting language” engenders only “something acutely transitory” -- a moment that passes in a way that sexual desire might, but caring never does. It seems certain that Maeve is the woman in the poem, and it is her belief in marriage that is often cited as the factor that kept them apart -- or at least out of the same bed. But although this was a factor, Larkin would, I think, have found some other way to avoid even a non-formalised commitment, such as co-habitation, or a life-long engagement, just as he did with Monica. In fact, Maeve and Monica each seem to have functioned to protect Larkin from making what was to him an unacceptable degree of commitment to the other.

It is evident that Larkin is unable to see marriage as anything that could be worked at, or shaped, and that people who seem to think otherwise, whether male or female, represent a threat. In order to perpetuate this belief he has constructed an interlocking system of stereotypes concerning relationships. In this system he preserves his stereotype of women, and clings to his idea that it is by avoiding emotional commitment that he will succeed artistically, and become (figuratively at least) immortal. Unfortunately, in order to preserve this view, he has had to nurture

a debilitating stereotype of himself as well. This is sad, because he fails to realise that his interests are not being served by his continued bid for exclusively male cultural identification, or by the self-containment he believes will protect him. He never quite faces the fact that the price he must pay to uphold these false gods is not enrichment and inspiration, but a narrowing of artistic vision.

The historical irony is that in general post-war women were looking for relationships that resembled a partnership.<sup>22</sup> This would have meant that women would have taken a larger share of the responsibilities that men found irksome, and that men would have had the opportunity to acknowledge the emotional side of their nature that previous masculine constructs commonly denied. In general, what men were prepared to let women have, however, was a continuation of the past: dependent, restrictive relationships. Many women found this difficult to accept and fought to be heard. Because the misogynist discourse was well established, and the feminist discourse was relatively new and unsanctioned, some women, no doubt, were forced into domineering or manipulative behaviours to ensure men fulfilled their marital and paternal obligations.<sup>23</sup> But times were changing, so that even in the teeth of powerful opposition, feminist ideas were spreading, altering relationships between the genders and between art and artists.

## **Part II: Modern Love: Duffy Fires the Canon**

Art has traditionally been regarded as a means of transcending specific philosophical and social constructs, but Carol Ann Duffy shows, through her juxtaposition of canonical elements (particularly form), patriarchal power structures and feminism, that aesthetic transcendence of important human issues is often just a form of denial of those issues. Because her attitudes have changed over time, it would seem that it is her exploration of relationships that has led her to take a strong, feminist stance rather than the other way about. In turn, feminist writing within what has been a male tradition has led her to realise the need to show that tradition to be grounded at least as much in habit as in truth.

In the 1980s, when she was in her teens and early twenties, Duffy regarded feminism as optional rather than essential to the philosophy of life that underpins her work. As late as 1989 she said: “I don’t mind being called a feminist poet, but I wouldn’t mind if I wasn’t. I think the concerns of art can go beyond that”,<sup>24</sup> and she added that although her poems come out of her “attitudes in a certain way”, she does not “feel any need to use those labels.”<sup>25</sup> At this time Duffy regarded herself as offering, through art, what feminism could not, implying that she believed it possible to divorce art from the patriarchal discourse of modern society, and from the effects of this discourse on the behaviour patterns of the populace. She goes on to say that had she been ten or fifteen years older she would probably have felt differently because “all women my age owe a tremendous debt to the women’s movement of that period for what they did to change things.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly, Duffy felt that she could relax, because feminism had already fulfilled its function.

In the 1989 interview, Duffy not only implies that women’s struggle against domination is over, but regards feminism as excluding many people. She has, she says, “separatist friends” and knows “men who are feminists”, so that feminism itself is a “camp that’s exclusive of men or non-feminists or the people who are

married and stay at home”.<sup>27</sup> Those excluded are difficult to identify as a group; Duffy resorts to dividing the world into ‘feminists’, ‘non-feminists’, and ‘people who are married and stay at home’ who are neither, and who (while she does not actually say so) are nearly all women.<sup>28</sup> The three groupings, then, could well be feminists, non-feminists (nearly all male), and potential feminists (nearly all female). Duffy’s realisation that all women share the problems that led to the rise of feminism is clouded, partly by her “separatist friends” who insist they are outside the scope of feminism, and partly by the anti-male, anti-marriage, anti-caregiver stance that characterised feminism for a time. Her ambivalence is clearly stated when she admits to “sometimes” thinking “traitor” when she reads of women who dissociate themselves from feminism; but “then you maybe read yourself saying it and are in turn horrified.”<sup>29</sup> This indicates that, in spite of her appreciation of the women’s movement, she is by no means wholly convinced that women’s struggle is over, and she is uncomfortable with the idea that feminism is exclusive.

Since 1989, however, Duffy has written a number of poems which comment on relationships. Many of these depict sexually active couples who, while they are not always concerned with legal marriage, have based their relationships on a marital-style commitment and/or a lifestyle that includes monogamy and cohabitation. Issues of patriarchy, power and domination of one partner over the other are often central to these poems. In working on these issues Duffy exposes many of the exploitative social processes that caused women to want to change the systems governing their lives. This in itself is a feminist process, and over the years Duffy has come to see feminism in a more positive light. Certainly there have been ongoing changes in feminist theory and attitudes generally, but it is, nevertheless, a measure of Duffy’s poetic stature as well as her integrity that she stated publicly, in 1993, “I’m a feminist and I think men should be encouraged to be feminists.”<sup>30</sup> Not only has Duffy changed her stance on feminism, but the strength of her poetic voice

has increased so that she can now claim authority to prescribe feminism for all as a means to a more healthy society.

It is interesting to observe the relationship between the firmness of her convictions and the increased social and artistic authority evident in her writing. In her first published volume of adult work, *Standing Female Nude* (1985), most poems about specific relationships invite identification from a wide section of readers. This is done through voices that are traditionally authoritative -- through the voice of an all seeing narrator ("Terza Rima SW19", "Naming Parts", "Alliance"); through men's voices ("You Jane", "Human Interest"); or through a speaker whose gender is not definitely revealed ("Saying Something", "Till Our Face", "Where We Came In"). Those that are obviously spoken in the first person (female) are defused and set apart from inter-gender debate, either because they specifically exclude men ("Oppenheimer's Cup and Saucer"), or because the speaker is presented as having lost contact with reality ("I Remember Me", "Dear Norman", "Woman Seated In The Underground, 1941"). In contrast, Duffy's more recent poetry is much stronger and more openly feminist. The *Selected Poems* (1994) contains material from her work in progress, *The World's Wife*, where, among others, "Mrs Midas", "Mrs Lazarus", and "Mrs Tiresias" speak for themselves. Moreover, these women make very direct criticisms of their husbands which impact not only upon modern personal and community relationships, but also upon traditions that have served to diminish the political authority of women, particularly in marriage and in art, while promoting those of men. By using the wives of characters who have been artistic subjects, Duffy exposes the artificiality of the structure that has upheld the traditional view of these men and their deeds, and because these are closely associated with empire, her relationship poems also have anti-imperialistic implications.

This direct use of the female voice, too, reveals the growing strength of both her feminist conviction, and the poetic authority which she uses to carve a place for

herself in the canon. Duffy's adult work has always included examples of her experiments with form. These not only underwrite her experiments with the subject/object position, but also give her the opportunity to resist the authority of the canon by literally chipping pieces off its building blocks, and re-arranging them in her own style: Duffy frequently takes forms associated with literariness, establishes her mastery and a recognisable reference, and then breaks the rules. In this way, she dismantles the canon piecemeal, and her experiments in giving a voice to the traditional "Other" can be seen as an attempt at reconstruction, so that the overall result is a remodelling rather than a demolition.

This is consistent with the recent feminist tendency to attack power structures in general rather than just areas of male domination, but the *status quo* has many strategies in place for its own defence, ensuring that Duffy's attempts at subversion evoke criticism. Ironically, Duffy herself is accused of a kind of literary separatism because she gives voice to women's issues in traditional poetic forms. Elizabeth Lowry, for instance, in reviewing *Sixty Women Poets*, writes against the idea of anthologies of women's writing, and objects to Duffy's poem "Standing Female Nude" on several grounds. The poem, she says, not only "labours under its heavy irony", and "fails to surprise us", but its "ironic inversion" can be linked to other, canonical works.<sup>31</sup> She concludes her criticism of Duffy with an attempt to refute a comment made by Linda France in her introduction to *Sixty Women Poets*:

France suggests that the erotic subject is 'part of a well-documented female tradition' - but surely it is simply part of a well documented *literary* tradition?

<sup>32</sup>

Although it is clear from the article that Lowry believes in the furtherance of women's issues, and particularly in artistic equality, she attempts to silence France and defuse Duffy by insisting on placing this poem in a strongly canonical context. Duffy says her poems are "heard in my head",<sup>33</sup> and this is the way she reads them herself. Lowry gives no acknowledgment of the oral aspect of the poem, although this might explain Duffy's use of the monologue form. If this is so, then the poem

can be linked to women's writing through the nature of its presentation, despite having formal or thematic canonical antecedents. Surely, then, it is Duffy's distancing of the canon that gives the "surprise", and the very act of distancing implies a connection.

This demonstrates the difficulty of asserting authority in any way that cannot be seen as a reinforcement of the *status quo*. It follows, then, that even when individuals who do not have traditional patriarchal authority step outside their patriarchal roles and oppress their partners, this can still be seen as a patriarchal process. A strong woman is said to 'wear the pants' in order to 'henpeck' her partner, who, especially if he is male, may be called 'a bit of a girl'. The male and female positions correspond to dominant and dominated respectively; and the eventual outcome of any power struggle is one of support (albeit indirectly applied) for the patriarchy.

If it is to be effective, Duffy's attempts to dismantle the processes of dominance must be multi-faceted, and she disarms the big guns of canonical form by dismantling them and re-assembling the components in unorthodox arrangements. In "Terza Rima SW19" (*SFN* 20), for example, she sets up the expectation of terza rima form, and she does deliver, but with a twist. The break in the rhyme scheme after the second tercet, coupled with the fact that there are fourteen lines in all, including a final couplet, suggests an affinity with sonnet form. In this poem, however, the order is reversed: the 'sestet'/'tercet times two' is placed above the octave. The break between the sestet and octave are *not* reinforced by a break in subject matter. The woman in the poem is speculating about her lover's feelings and about their possible future together, and her speculations continue until the last tercet. To divide the poems in terms of sense, then, would make a section of nine lines of discontinuous terza rima, balanced by one of five lines, and here Duffy declares her anti-canonical intent.



Using each to contribute to the subversion of the other, Duffy constructs modern, abstract (but highly meaningful) art out of pieces of two formal, canonical structures. This destroys much of the powerful mystique surrounding those forms, and shows that they are essentially arbitrary, because they can still function artistically when changed. That the subject matter breaks at the point where the man is exposed as lacking self-knowledge, and that this break is hidden by the terza rima form, is highly provocative because it establishes a direct link between canonical practices and covert double standards associated with an authoritative masculine position. This implication is strengthened by the breakdown, documented in the poem, of the romantic constructs that have traditionally underpinned sonnet form. That this linking of the canon and patriarchal power is intended, is made obvious by the anti-romantic stance of Duffy's poem, and I shall say more about that later. The "SW19" of the title, and the fact that the poem opens with "the common" implies that sonnets and tercets have too long been held in common, and have been available only to a few because of their close association with a male-oriented discourse and its rigidly enforced boundaries.

Although the title suggests that Duffy's use of terza rima was deliberate, when asked about her use of dramatic monologue and the technique of "other voices", she resisted the idea that these are things she actively seeks, saying "Well I wasn't conscious of it till I'd done it", and, when pressed about the voices, "it's people and use that I'm interested in. So in a sense it is an accident."<sup>34</sup> This in no way damages the subversive effect of her appropriation of conventional forms: if she uses them unconsciously, perhaps she is attempting to reclaim her own language by re-translating her own words out of a dominant discourse, subverting the authority this discourse offers. In his article "Language and Structure in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy",<sup>35</sup> Simon Brittan demonstrates just how irritating the dissection and rearrangement of formal practices can be to those who worship the canon. For him,

it would seem, canonical forms have solidified into a kind of precious metal: a literary equivalent of the crown jewels.

Simon Brittan objects vociferously to many formal elements in Duffy's work. "Miles Away" (*SM* 61), he says, is "dévoid of any form", and begins with a "bald statement" that "immediately deprives us of any excitement" because it ruins the "surprise". Duffy cannot win, though, because he also berates her for, in the same poem, using words he sees as unnecessary. He gives his abridged version of the action of the poem, and complains that the words he finds unnecessary cannot be justified in terms of meter. The poem is "irritating" because it has affinities with prose, and because it does not stand up to his "simple test of a poem's structure" that is based on the assumption that in 'good' poetry, line breaks will be related to sense. At no time does Brittan relate what Duffy does technically or formally to her subject matter, or to the aural effect. He fails to seek any holistic explanation for her subversion of the conventional, and his criticism culminates with the accusation that although in "Poet for Our Times" (*TOC* 15), she "attempts iambic pentameters", she breaks this rigid form (with what might possibly be seen as a couple of alexandrine lines). Brittan becomes upset, and attributes her non-conformity to "sloppiness", indicating that it is Duffy, not the journalist in the poem, whom he sees as "the bottom line of art".

Criticism can focus on formal structures and techniques that lead straight back to the canon, which is *not* people-centred. But Duffy is "interested in people", and often declines the limitations that patriarchal and canonical stereotypes offer by refraining from making her poems gender specific, or sexual orientation specific, except where context demands it. This shows that her rejection of power structures that harm mutuality in relationships is not limited to a feminist resistance to male domination, and that she does not necessarily accept a narrow version of gender. The concern, then, is not just for the oppressed, but as well for the oppressors and the ways in which they hurt themselves in the process of hurting others.

An interest in people automatically implies an interest in experience, and some of Duffy's less recent 'relationship' poetry has its origins in her own experiences. Moreover, several aspects of her own cultural origins are not mainstream, and her experiences as 'other' enrich her insight. She is not only a gay woman in a country that has demonstrated an almost pathologically held concern with the enforcement of heterosexual norms, but is also a woman who has lived with a man in a patriarchal environment.<sup>36</sup> In addition, she has experienced the trauma of migration from a marginalised (Scottish) culture to a mainstream (English) culture. Her range of experience enables her to comment on the more subtle effects of powerplay on interpersonal relationships. This, along with her strategy for disassembling and extending formal structures, ensures that Duffy's exposure of domination as damaging is also evident in the thematic structures of her poetry.

With theme, as with form, she does not take on the patriarchy as a colossus, but concentrates on its small meccano-like components: the ways in which these affect the individuals she writes; and how these practices, when included in the overall system, result in a myriad of ways in which people (mis)treat each other. Close reading of her 'relationship' poetry shows that the ways people behave towards each other are often guided not by motives of mutual good, but by destructive social habits. Duffy shows that it is in relationships that our social patterns have the most direct effect, and it is here that we can most easily access the mechanisms of our own behaviour and begin to change. In *Standing Female Nude*, Duffy portrays a variety of relationships, often implying that they could be better: "Terza Rima SW19", already discussed for its formal properties, is an example.

The woman depicted in the poem is on the Common with her lover, who tells her that "He wants her". She does not mention whether she loves him, but wonders whether he loves her, and judges that "It could last a year ... possibly two / and then crumble like stale bread." Although bread is literally to hand, as she "feeds the ducks", her use of the term "stale bread" implies that for her this relationship is no

brief, exciting ‘cream-cake’, or ‘crumpet’, but is the staff of life. As she crumbles and throws the bread, the woman tells her own fortune, “*He loves me, loves me not* with each deft throw.” Clearly, though the woman is genuine, she is worried that she and her lover lack the skill to negotiate the difficult social and personal terrain associated with a long-term relationship. She weighs up the merits and demerits of embarking on a course of action that may bring pain, and seems to discount the possibilities for pleasure.

The man, on the other hand, is prepared at least to go through the motions of commitment, for he “swears his love is true / and, darling, forever.” His words are immediately exposed as unrealistic and “[un]true” when suddenly, in front of them “death” in the form of a bird of prey “drops from above like a stone”, reminding the couple that their love is vulnerable to attack and may be killed prematurely; but even at best it is finite and will end when they die. It would seem that these people have accepted the finite nature of their lives, but the man still wants to offer “forever”, and appears insincere, or deluded about love. He fails to take this chance to make his offer more convincing by modifying it, and the woman remains unimpressed. The poem closes with the hope that “she might write or he may phone” after some thought; and a genuine, realistic commitment may yet be possible. For now there is time to take stock.

This couple display a contrast of ‘sense and sensibility,’ but in something of a role reversal. That it is the man who seeks the romance of “forever” calls into question the commonly-held belief that dewy-eyed, romantic attitudes are unique to women. Here the reader is reminded that men have a feminine side, too, but there is also a less pleasant message: men can afford to be romantic. A man is considered romantic if he buys flowers, remembers anniversaries, makes flattering remarks about his partner’s appearance and promises to love one woman truly and “forever.” If the woman in “Terza Rima SW 19” accepts her lover’s romantic notions, she must accord him the authority of “forever.” Having invested her own

authority in his, how can she then question his judgement or his action? How can she then avoid becoming his Lacanian mirror, through which he may view his own imagined immortality? Anyone subject to such domination must fight to retain autonomy; so as long as the man remains unrealistically romantic, the woman *must* be unrelentingly realistic.

There is a dearth of successful heterosexual relationships in Duffy's poetry, and close readings of her 'obviously heterosexual' poems, such as the one above, imply that men have further to go than women in developing satisfactory relationship skills. It is the woman who has noticed that there is something wrong, and who needs to hold onto her share of the joint power-brokerage. Even if the man comes to see it as his duty to give up some patriarchal power, however, he may well need more persuasion to accept that it is actually in his own best interests to offer, and seek, an equal relationship.

As women step outside the home, then, there is a parallel need for men to give up the domination that sole-breadwinner status has traditionally given, and take on some 'womanly' skills. If the man in "Terza Rima SW19" clings to his dream of "forever", he grants himself power over time, and licence to regard the relationship as indestructible rather than in need of nurture. Only if he is able to shift his focus away from the power and certainty of "forever" to the uncertainty of the present will he be able to work to make the relationship successful. It is unlikely he will realise this, though, because he has compensated by seeing himself as 'romantic' and romance as a female trait. The woman has already been made to function as her lover's mirror: he has not seen her as she is, but sees his own reflection which he then labels female. Thus he hides his desire for dominance under a pseudo-feminine element, and deceives himself into believing he has arrived at a universal point of view.

"Forever" is out of the question, then, but even a lifetime might be impossible if nothing is learned from past mistakes. The poem raises varied and complex issues

about intimate, couple relationships, but since there is nothing remarkable about this particular couple, Duffy seems to be saying that most of us are deficient in relationship skills. An obvious consequence is that we must accept that few of our love affairs will last, and that many may not even begin. This, however, does not mean that ending a relationship will be easy, or that there will be no awkwardness between ex-lovers.

In “Where We Came In” (*SFN* 24), two ex-lovers meet in a not-so-cosy foursome over a meal. Now that they see each other again, “small intimacies / [flare] up across the table”, and not the hurt, but the “tediousness of loss” is recalled. As in “Terza Rima SW19” it is the breaking of bread that symbolises the end of the relationship, but here it is “a symbol / of betrayal”: a sort of Last Supper out of which a rebirth may emerge. This bread is fresh, and both people deliberately break some in order to feed themselves. In a sense, they are ingesting their old love -- breaking it down even further and drawing sustenance from it in a ceremonial communion. That both ex-lovers take part in this ritual indicates that there is a tacit agreement to avoid embarrassment and recrimination by not examining their own or each other's motives and behaviour too closely. They agree to let go of the past, and the speaker distances her/himself from the old lover by saying “I’m happy now.” Perhaps it is this most recent meeting that has brought home the realisation that “a candle / shapes the memory”, and softens the aspect. The “light” that once emanated from the ex-lover “has long since gone.”

Insight comes in the last stanza, when the speaker “see[s] [their] gestures endlessly repeated”, and observes that the new relationships are no different from the one that was, in the end, unsuccessful. The last word of the poem invokes another kind of ritual by inviting the reader to behave like a child, imitating “the old man called Michael Finnegan” of the nursery rhyme, and “begin again” on life’s relationship roundabout. The speaker finally realises that this is the voice of the same childhood devil which governed past destructive behaviour patterns, obscuring

the way to self improvement that might have saved the relationship. This means that all future relationships are also doomed unless this devil is cast out and the attitudes that protected it are replaced with a new level of maturity.

In this poem Duffy weakens the hetero/homo-sexual divide by refusing to give a clear indication of gender, or of her position within the poem. Because the poem is not gender specific there is no echo of blame or attribution of enlightenment attached to any stereotype, and Duffy's personae are varied enough that when not given specific clues as to their identity, the reader is forced to see them simply as people. Here, then, are two people who were once at par, but who now have different degrees of social skill. Whether they are male or female, if they persist in their old ways, they will hurt not only others, but also themselves.

Set between these two poems, "Till Our Face" (*SFN* 22) depicts a melding of two people that, while some social skill is implicit, demands specific sexual skill. This is a sexual union that is described as a moment of sensory enrichment, a "silver" and "crimson" epiphany where

the roof of the brain  
takes flight. ... till our face  
is a flower soaked in its own scent.

The planets abandon us.

Sexual activity affords an almost out-of-body spiritual experience that is not tied to the concrete reality of an every-day relationship, and the idea that "the brain / takes flight" is reminiscent of the Buddhist idea of astral travel. The physical relationship provides access to a dimension that somehow escapes physical and emotional boundaries. But although Duffy's words evoke a quality of orgasmic sharing that is spiritually uplifting, she reminds us that this is outside the system of everyday life where the "planets" rule. This world, then, is one of personal growth that goes beyond rationality, beyond the Enlightenment, and beyond feminist and patriarchal issues. It offers an experience that requires each partner to strive for perfection separately in order that together they may experience something that is outside

themselves. But in order to experience this transcendence it is necessary to give up the power-plays that characterise many common social processes.

Once this renunciation of excessive personal power is accomplished, neither the concrete world nor destructive social structures need impinge on sexual joy. For now, however, most people cannot achieve such abandonment outside of a highly developed relationship. Because we often treat each other badly, it takes time to develop the trust and security needed to relax the inhibitions that can prevent us reaching even moderate heights. Successful sexual unions are highly rewarding, but sexual acceptance and accord are not enough to maintain a long term live-in relationship. Conducting a relationship involves a variety of skills, and if we do not critically examine our day-to-day behaviour, similar mistakes will recur in any relationship we form, and prevent the relationship from growing. This is the kind of change self-knowledge can bring; but change, even when it is sought, is not easy. Nevertheless, to admit that change is necessary is a positive step. Relationships are like a dance where, if one partner alters the steps, the other is forced to respond. There is an element of negotiation implicit in such change which places responsibility on both partners. Duffy presents a number of male personae who do not know this, and who seem not to want to know. These men depend on a definite socio-sexual subject position and show, in their behaviour and reasoning, the grain of truth that allows the continuation of unfair stereotypes, prejudice, and destructive double standards.

In "You Jane" (*SFN* 34), the sexual behaviour of the husband is narcissistic and centred on the act of intercourse. There is a total absence of foreplay, except at the weekend, when the wife assumes a submissive position and "bends over ... in suspenders." Generally, however, all that is required of the woman is that "She don't complain." The husband is well aware of his "muscle", and although his wife has "run a bit to fat" it does not matter too much, as he is turned on by the power of his own body and the power of his position as "Man of the house." He



sees himself as “Master”, and “fart[s] a guinness smell against the wife” as a sign of mastery -- a ritual to which the wife has become accustomed. This man is typically (rather than archetypally) insensitive: he is feeling fine and he assumes his wife is too, but that does not mean he does not care about her. If Duffy wished to portray him as completely callous, she might have had him go home for a ‘fuck’ rather than “home to her”, then roll over and go to sleep. Surprisingly, though, he seems to appreciate his wife’s snuggling “after [he’s] given her one”, and he has an awareness of the mundane practical tasks she performs for him. Because “She don’t complain”, it is not possible to assess the woman’s feelings or whether the man has ever used physical violence to keep her in line, but there is a suggestion of benevolence, and the wife is allowed her own “point of view” as long as she defers to his authority.

This man is vain, inconsiderate and crude, but he does not seem to be deliberately cruel. This is in contrast with the nasty, insolent, insulting behaviour depicted in “Alliance” (*SFN* 26). The woman here is not permitted a point of view, and her only defence against her husband is to “[smile] / at his bullying”. Her ethnic differences have no opportunity to enrich the relationship because they are constantly and publicly degraded by her husband. She protects herself by behaving “like a glove-puppet”, hiding her feelings and her cultural identity: “word-perfect” in her daily lines, but “dreaming in another language”. The only strong feelings between her and her husband are powerfully negative feelings of hatred, loathing, and fear; and this woman is a “hostage”, staying only to protect “her sons”, who will eventually be men and possibly follow their father’s example in their behaviour towards their mother. This woman is tossed roughly on the sea of her husband’s intolerance. Because she has no firm ground on which to stand she is unable to oppose her husband by dominating him, or by manipulating him. Instead, she has withdrawn into herself, into a perpetual state of siege.

These women do not fit the misogynist stereotype. They do not nag, bully or domineer over their husbands; nor do they seek to absorb men in a way that robs them of money, life, selfhood, or achievement. Instead, the men are the absorbers, naggers and dominators over women. The use of wry humour shows that Duffy is aware of the irony of describing men in a way that suggests they oppress women by the use of the same tactics they purport to despise in women. Like the man in “Terza Rima SW 19”, these men see not the women under their gaze, but their own reflection which they mistake for the female. This process allows the men to avoid knowing their partners, or themselves. Duffy shows how these tactics limit and destroy human relationships; how, when used from a position of power, they destroy women.

The discourse that upholds these destructive behaviours also upholds standards applied to much traditional art (the notion of the heroic and standards of beauty, for example). Even when overtones of gender domination are obviously present, however, art and its attendant constructs are sometimes considered to be untainted by them because art is a special case that ‘rises above’ human need and imperfection. In her early work Duffy begins to expose the artificiality of divorcing art from the ways in which people relate to each other. In “Standing Female Nude” (*SFN* 46), for instance, it is the model who now has a voice, and from her position as artefact she exposes the machinations that have kept her in the object position, and the way in which these reinforce the status of the artist at her expense. Artistic standards enable the artist to treat his model as an object, and the woman expects to “be represented” not with warmth, but “analytically” and drained of colour. She identifies with the painting nevertheless, saying “I shall be ... hung / in great museums.” She stops short of saying that she expects to be “well” hung, but the implication that her femininity has been obliterated or appropriated by the male painter, remains. She envisages “the Queen of England gazing / on [her] shape”, and laughs to think of herself as a “Magnificent” work of art. It is ironic that the

painter is “a genius” and yet fails to capture her essential humanity. Humanity is not valued in high Art, and the painting “does not look like [her]”. She leaves, reflecting that although both she and the painter are poor, she is free to enjoy her evenings “with wine and [dancing] around the bars”, while he is compelled to live a miserable existence dedicated to formalised art.

This relationship between painter and model is not an interactive one, but a textual one. The woman is to be frozen in two dimensions, and all the response that is required of her is that she move as directed, “Further to the right, / Madame. And do try to be still.” This woman knows there is nothing in this for her except the money, and she declines the artist’s invitation to become sexually involved with him. It is the man, the artist, who takes himself over-seriously, and paints because he has to, because “There’s no choice.” His duty to use his talent (which he may regard as a duty both to himself and to the world) is served, but only by skipping the middle distance, between the artist and the world. He thinks only inwardly and globally, and absolves himself of a duty to those around him.

As an artist he is a “genius” perhaps, but as a human being he is inconsiderate and naive, and cannot assess the relative values of his own needs. This is made obvious when he becomes sexually aroused, and it is not clear whether he is reacting to the woman or to his painting of her. It is clear that the model knows something that the painter does not, and she shows no inclination to add her body to its image. She rejects the invitation to join him in a sexual relationship that he will, in the end, sacrifice on the pyre of his artistic martyrdom. It would seem that as a man and as an artist he occupies a privileged position in society which protects him from certain kinds of knowledge relevant to his own well-being. Because she does not have a vested interest in ignorance, the power of knowing about the man’s self-deception belongs to the model; the power to silence her in order to preserve his own state of not knowing, is the artist’s. Although the model is never granted a subject position

by either the patriarchy or the visual arts and is “represented” rather than presented to the Queen, the poet has the power to give her a subversive voice.

The importance of self-knowledge is a recurring theme in Duffy’s work, and carries over into her later collections where she continues to demonstrate how artistic and romantic constructs impede change by enabling subjects to deceive themselves about relationships. In “Lovesick” (*SM* 54), the speaker attempts to preserve and capture the beloved by textualizing, and takes a photograph before hiding the original “red and shining apple” away “in the attic.” As with the painting in “Standing Female Nude,” this photograph’s value lies in a borrowed veracity that is independent of the object itself. Like the painter, the speaker cannot tell which is really the beloved -- the apple or its textual representation. The photograph is more attractive because it lacks volition, and will enable the speaker to negotiate the apple’s territory without the need to consider its actual properties, which might be incompatible with the speaker’s own needs. The speaker has “checked that it was safe,” and can now colonise the apple’s representation, appropriating its space and dehistoricising it by acknowledging only a fantastic present which is not really the apple’s at all. The apple itself is in custody, in a state of isolation where changes that might damage the fantasy need not be noted. The speaker does not want to know the apple will decay and seeks a selective ignorance, saying: “Whatever you are calling about, / I am not interested.” This statement is not even partial truth, but is motivated by fear. The speaker has already classified the intrusion as a threat, and adds, “Go away. You with the big teeth.” It seems that (like Winifred and “bosomy rose”) the love the photograph represents will not survive if the apple is allowed to fulfil its own destiny. The speaker/lover has displaced the apple, and is really the consumer here. Even to allow a more objective gaze than that of the “Lovesick” one is a risk to the carefully constructed edifice of self-deception which makes the fantasy seem real.

Many of Duffy's poems describe a disorientation that implies a total lack of faith in romantic expectation; but even so, it is surprising -- at least initially -- to find she gives "an onion" for a "Valentine" (*MT* 34). Unlike "a red rose or a satin heart" (the usual romantic tokens) an onion "is a moon wrapped in brown paper. / It promises light / like the careful undressing of love." An onion also has a "fierce kiss [that] will stay on your lips" and, because it functions in the every-day as well as in the romantic world, "It will blind you with tears / like a lover. / It will make your reflection / a wobbling photo of grief." Onions, then, have the capacity to show us to ourselves as we are, rather than to offer an escape. This is not to say they do not have a romantic function, however, for onion rings can symbolise "wedding-ring[s], if you like"; and whether the relationship is a success or not, "Its scent will cling to your fingers" or "cling to [the] knife" with which you sever the connection. Emotional attachments, then, are the savoury flavour of life rather than the sweet flavour of romance. Unlike the "stale bread" in "Terza Rima SW19", and the fresh bread in "Where We Came In", the chief beauty of onions is that they are not easily contained or disowned.

Like the onion, marriage also penetrates the skin, and informs the conscience. "Adultery" (*MT* 38), with "a stranger who's dynamite in bed" gives not a golden gloss, but the colour of "dark glasses in the rain": the "sick, green tint" of "bruise" coloured "Guilt". Later, in the "marital bed", there is "selfish, autobiographical sleep" after a "slow replay" of "a lethal, thrilling night / up against a wall". Tears are hidden by "the slicing of innocent onions", which are also used here for their sting; but this time the pain is a blind. This is only one of a series of deceptive moves, including "money tucked in the palms" of the "New gloves"; and "Paranoia for lunch", so that the unfaithful body becomes "[a] tarnished spoon ... / stirring betrayal" that robs the self of respect. In the short term, at least, this betrayal hurts the perpetrator more than the victim, who remains ignorant. Trust and mutuality are damaged, however, and the relationship is likely to fail.

There is more than one kind of betrayal, though, and in the poem “Mrs Midas”,<sup>37</sup> Duffy has made a clear connection between the ways men harm women and the ways men harm themselves, both of which are directly relevant to marriage. The speaker, Mrs Midas, is not only married but also stays at home. At the beginning of the poem she is portrayed at early evening as the average suburban housewife, drinking “a glass of wine, / [having] begun to unwind, while the vegetables cooked”, and awaiting the appearance of her husband. She says that at that time, when her husband’s self-destruction began, the relationship was “passionate”, and the days “halcyon”. The sex was good, too, and they “[unwrapped] each other, rapidly, / like presents, fast food”. This couple had a successful relationship, but now the husband’s gift for making gold/money has become an obsession, and he has lost much of what made him human and lovable. He is no longer able to give physical love without also giving hurt. Like the man in “Alliance” he has become a threat to his wife’s very survival, and she has come to “[fear] his honeyed embrace, / the kiss that would turn [her] lips to a work of art.”

Here is a man who has sought to be admired, envied and immortal, and as in “Standing Female Nude” there is an implied reference to the male artist who sacrifices those around him on the altar of his own artistic genius. The model is better off than the wife, however, because hers was merely an economic contract. She was paid and could escape to a life that did not include the painter. In contrast, Mrs Midas has to protect not only herself as best she can, but the accoutrements of her lifestyle which are all within the realm of her husband’s influence. She tolerates a gold “toilet”, but has insisted on “Separate beds”, and has “locked the cat in the cellar” and “moved the phone”. Mr Midas’ gold “feeds no one ... slakes / no thirst”, and it is possible that Mrs Midas not only defends herself from his creative wheeling and dealing, but fends for herself. Even after he is dead she has only the hideaway caravan where her husband, unable to heal himself, tried to salvage what was left of his life. She has “sold / the contents of the house”, and does not value

his golden legacy. That she had to sell everything and move to the caravan suggests that no one else values Midas' gold either.

Mr Midas' artistic achievement, although three-dimensional, is not only more dehumanising than that of the "genius" painter, but also more destructive to the environment. He exploits nature, leaving "Golden trout / on the grass" where real trout once were: the spoiled natural resources of the area. This links Midas the artist to Midas the entrepreneurial businessman or property developer. Everything he touches turns to gold: a businessman's dream. This man will mortgage even his wife's home to finance schemes that gild nature's lilies in a metallic art that reeks of money and precludes life. Throughout the poem his own early demise is associated with his commodification of nature, and evokes the idea of the big businessman who dies slowly of gastric or heart troubles because although he can turn a natural event into money, he cannot live with his lifestyle. Like the speaker in "Lovesick," Mr Midas has embraced an artificial construct, and protects this by ignoring a part of his own being.

Early in the poem the reader is reminded that Mrs Midas is accustomed to thinking of the good of both marriage partners. She is preparing food to sustain them both, but her husband is no longer able to receive this token of her love, and this highlights the seriousness of the betrayal her husband's actions represent. It is evident that her husband was able to accept all she gave, and remain self-contained, self-centred and selfish. The two individuals who constitute this particular couple have been conducting their relationship according to separate sets of rules, and consequently the mutuality Mrs Midas had valued has vanished. She feels she can understand and forgive "the idiocy or greed", but try as she might, she cannot forgive the "lack of thought", the "Pure selfishness" that brought her husband to a state so extreme they could no longer live together, or have a physical relationship. Even years later, after he has become "thin, / [and] delirious" and wasted away, it is not his wealth, fame, or cold-gold achievements that she misses, but "his hands, his

warm hands on [her] skin, his touch.” Mrs Midas leaps over her more recent memories of her husband’s obsessive acquisitiveness to a time when they were able to share.

Mr and Mrs Midas love each other, and yet Mr Midas clings to constructs that destroy their ability to live together, using artistic and economic standards to uphold his actions. Mrs Midas mourns the double loss of her husband -- first to the obsession with gold that makes him inhuman, and then again when he dies. She has nursed him all through his gold-fever, and is in no doubt that it is the gold that destroyed him. Mr Midas’ internalization of the ‘gold-standard’ has also hurt his wife. Unlike her husband, however, although Mrs Midas has suffered and is in pain, she has dissociated herself from her husband’s activities and has survived. She has a more feminist set of priorities which do not force her to accept her husband’s behaviour, and she remains emotionally intact because she has a repertoire of cathartic processes. These include the poem itself, where she talks frankly about her problem, and the anger she shows towards her husband’s neglect of her. Her dialogue and anger are both feminist because they indicate that Mrs Midas values herself more highly than a patriarchy can permit if it is to secure her support for its functions. The art that once underwrote these functions has also been called to account by the art of the poem that gives her voice.

This suggests that continuing to view art in traditional ways leads to emulation of traditional processes that damage both enforcers and victims of the patriarchy, and ensures the failure of human relationships. There are other ways to view art, and we need to make changes in the way we see many traditional figures. Attributes that tradition teaches us to despise (such as greed, for instance) may be something we all have to deal with, but some kinds of selfishness can only flourish by consuming someone else, usually a beloved, who is prepared to be unselfish, or who is hoodwinked (or bullied) into giving a great deal more than they receive. This is another kind of greed.



In her poetry, then, Duffy has progressed to the point where she is no longer hampered by her misgivings about the universality of feminism and its role in art, because she sees it as a way people can avoid hurting themselves and each other. Her recent poetry shows feminism as appropriate for everyone, and as an important artistic standard which she has incorporated into the underlying ideas that inform her work. Of course all power structures in modern society can be seen as patriarchal because of the tendency to 'masculinise' those in power, and 'feminise' those who are without power. This means that whatever the position of specific individuals regarding mainstream patriarchal authority there is no straightforward way of proving that power plays, even in single gender relationships, really do fall outside this system. Thus Duffy's criticisms are seen as feminist, but they can also be seen as 'peoplist' because of her unequivocal rejection of hierarchical structures in intimate adult relationships.

To this extent, her poetry may also be said to include masculinist, as well as feminist, elements because of its concern for both women and men. This kind of masculinist concern is compatible with feminism, and implies that men and women can work together to improve their relationship behaviours. While resistance to oppression may lead to a kind of liberation, absence of oppression can lead to equal relationships that enable the kind of mutuality people need. The overall nature of each relationship depends very much on the skill of the participants: on their willingness to learn and practice habits that will ensure that the needs of both partners are satisfied, and that the love is kept alive. Mrs Midas and the woman on the common both want what the men are not willing to give -- a relationship based on a shared humanity -- and it is this sharing that Duffy highlights as most important throughout, leading to the occasional perfect moment, and often implying that this style of relationship is in the best interest of everyone. These men have declined to share properly, and have deprived themselves of mutuality and enrichment. The man on the common is prepared to lose his lover rather than compromise; Mr Midas

loses his life rather than give up even a little of his material power; and the painter narrows his life to encompass only art rather than share his artistic glory. There is no doubt that these men would have been better off if they had been “encouraged to be feminists,” as Duffy suggests.

Again, Duffy’s observations of the people around her can be seen as comment on the kinds of behaviour exhibited by Larkin (and, again, this suggests that he is no more or less self-deceived than much of society). As there are similarities between Larkin and Duffy’s “Model” librarian, so there are parallels between his behaviour and relationship strategies she represents as doomed to fail. Like the painter, Larkin saves himself for art, but misses at least as much as he gains, and it is possible that he pays for his early productivity with his later aridity. Like Mr Midas, he is not willing to participate in a relationship of shared humanity where his patriarchal authority is replaced by a partnership, and, like Mr Midas, he tries to bolster his productivity from a position of loneliness, misery and jealously guarded privacy. Like Mrs Midas, the women in his life are faithful to him, but are never allowed close enough to influence his way of thinking. It is evident that Larkin was able to accept all they gave, and remain self-contained, self-centred and selfish, conducting relationships according to a set of rules that would have made relationships altogether impossible if the women in his life had adopted similar standards. This is evident not least in his attitude to text, where women are captured as young and static, and, like the apple in the attic, forced to deny their destiny in order to retain his attention. The kind of transcendence where “the planets abandon us” is not available to Larkin, because he is not prepared to abandon the planets and the double standards of the ‘rules’ he learned early in life. To do so would be to abandon (temporarily at least) the hierarchical possibilities that permit castle building and acquisition of empire.

<sup>1</sup> Richards, 109 and chapter 4. Richards argues that belief in “an invisible centre and true meaning” of knowledge constitutes a kind of paranoia.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Gowans, *Innocence Lost: An Examination of Inescapable Moral Wrongdoing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 131-2.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Regan, *An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism: Philip Larkin*. (London: MacMillan, 1992, *The Critics Debate Series*, Michael Scott general editor), 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Life*, 289.

<sup>5</sup> *Life*, 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters*, 203. Larkin is referring to Monica Jones.

<sup>7</sup> Even in the late 1990s, I have occasionally heard it said that it is much worse for a woman to swear than for a man to do so. See also Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (London: The MacMillan Press, and New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Goode & Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell 1994), 172-8, 181-2. These authors also note that when fear is based on concrete events a myth both explains things that are known to be true and allows scapegoats to be made of the people at the centre of the myth who then take the blame for the way things are (60).

<sup>9</sup> Horrocks, 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Life*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Life*, 267.

<sup>12</sup> *Life*, 267.

<sup>13</sup> Horrocks, 101.

<sup>14</sup> *Life*, 234-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Life*, 235.

<sup>16</sup> *Life*, 237.

<sup>17</sup> Regan, 121.

<sup>18</sup> *Life*, 310.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters*, 335.

<sup>20</sup> *Life*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Letters*, 344.

<sup>22</sup> Penny Summerfield, “Approaches to Women and Social Change in the Second World War,” in *What Difference Did the War Make?* (Brian Brivati & Harriet Jones ed., London: Leicester University Press, 1993), 63-79. Summerfield cites surveys by the Central Office of Information, and by Mass-Observation, both 1944. She says that despite the post-war pressure placed on women to hand their jobs over to men and return to the hearth, “women surveyed either definitely wanted to carry on in full- or part-time paid work or felt that their decisions about the matter would depend on a number of factors, including the availability of work, how much their husbands earned, and economic circumstances generally” (71-2). Also speaking of the same year, 1944, Summerfield calls the idea that marriage would have to become more of a partnership a “new orthodoxy,” and also notes that “Public discourses were increasingly emphasising new styles of marriage based on partnership, teamwork and companionship.” She adds, however, that there was “considerable uncertainty about the wisdom of encouraging marital styles that would make women less confined to domesticity” (77).

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby ed., *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992). Cases quoted in this text illustrate the powerful motivation for women to accept beating if it meant continued economic support for themselves and their children. Women saw remaining in the marriage as the only way to keep the family together, as they were not optimistic about gaining custody (235). The men knew they had the upper hand in this and taunted their wives threatening lack of support if a complaint resulted in their arrest (236).

<sup>24</sup> Carol Ann Duffy was speaking in an interview with Andrew McAllister which appeared in *Bête Noire* (Hull, Humberside, 1988. Winter, 6), 71. Future references to this interview will appear simply as *Bête Noire*.

<sup>25</sup> *Bête Noire*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> *Bête Noire*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Bête Noire*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> *Changing Households: The British Household Panel Study 1990-92* (N. Buck et al. (eds) 1994) quoted in the preface to Ray Pahl's book *After Success: Fin de Siècle Anxiety and Identity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) makes the point that growth in women's employment in the 1990s, even after adjustment for childbirth, suggests that “women's employment growth has been concentrated in ‘irregular’ jobs providing ‘discontinuous’ employment.” Pahl goes on to say that although the proportion of men in the “flexible work-force” has risen from 18 percent to 27 percent in the last eight years, “among women the

figure has remained stable at around 50 percent.” Pahl sees “flexibilization and the changing consciousness and aspirations of women” as “twin driving forces” that are changing both work and parenting styles, but he quotes no figures to show how women’s position has changed. Despite the idea that gender is a position that can be adopted in varying ways at varying times, rather than a fixed fact of life, these figures suggest that most people are locked into traditional roles, at least in relation to employment and nurture practices.

<sup>29</sup> *Bête Noire*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, speaking to Amanda Armstrong in “Potent Poetry”, *Writer’s Monthly*, October 1993. 4

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Lowry, “Relentlessly Feminine: the flawed values of *Sixty Women Poets*” in *Thumbscrew*, Tim Kendal ed., No. 2 Spring 1995, 20. Lowry cites Henry James’ “A Landscape Painter” and Edith Wharton’s “The Temperate Zone” as examples of works where “a woman is idealised by an artist but finds his vision of her unpersuasive.”

<sup>32</sup> Lowry, 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Bête Noire*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Bête Noire*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Simon Brittan, “Language and Structure in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy” in *Thumbscrew*, Oxford. 1:1, Winter 1994/5, 58-64.

<sup>36</sup> Mentioned in *Writer’s Monthly*, October 1993. 4

<sup>37</sup> Duffy, *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin, 1994. 131-4

## Chapter 4

### Religio Medici: Faith, Hope and Charity

Empire-building provides an authority structure that may well appeal to lives with no sense of plot, giving individuals a ready-made hierarchy on which to organise their priorities. Nevertheless, it is interesting to speculate whether the British populace would have supported imperialist expansionism so thoroughly if it had not been seen as sanctioned by God. Certainly, it is inconceivable that even a textual empire might be built or maintained without calling on the authority of commonly held belief, which, if it is to lend authority to the text, must either seek to reinforce established dogma (as, say, Milton sought to do) or find an alternative focus, and Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy both write in ways that call established faith into question. In doing so, these poets imply alternatives, but they also experience difficulty in separating their national and cultural identity from an acceptance of Christianity. Both are products of a Christian country, and attended Christian schools. While neither seeks to be overtly Christian, it is inevitable that Christian dogma, practices and history will underpin the linguistic, cognitive and moral structures of each poet. Without doubt, both would seem foreign -- perhaps incomprehensible -- and could not write as they do in a country where the laws, customs and moral attitudes stem from a history of, say, Islam, or Judaism. Therefore, even as they dissociate themselves from institutionalised religion and suggest alternative foci for human spirituality, in asserting their cultural identity

(whether this is Englishness or another kind of Britishness) both poets ally themselves with Christianity and utilise its unifying properties in forming the kinship and community links needed for such a shift.

Larkin and Duffy seek to facilitate a shift of spiritual focus, not only away from institutionalised religion, but also from the divine to the secular: a spirituality of the ordinary, and the sacredness of custom. Larkin has spoken about the value of the ordinary. At the age of about seventeen, he records that he and his friend, Jim (Gunner?), agreed that boys inherit their politics from their fathers, and that this makes these beliefs more “sacred”. The boys also feel that they are more likely to fight over such directly inherited beliefs, and Larkin notes that he and his friend Bish “nearly quarrelled over politics and so forth”.<sup>1</sup> Later, “At the age of twenty-six”,<sup>2</sup> Larkin says that he was brought up in an “atheist” home,<sup>3</sup> and notes that ‘family views’ really means ‘father’s’ views. He makes it clear that he has absorbed, rather than adopted, these views, which he outlines, and he regards this and his reading material as formative, making him “almost completely a product of [his] age”. This illustrates the point that community, kinship and belief are inseparable. That Larkin never actually did fight to uphold his father’s beliefs -- for instance, that there is no God -- strengthens the assertion that it is no simple matter to divorce cultural identity from the religious beliefs of the dominant group. Despite the Christian influence of his socialisation, however, Larkin’s upbringing ensured that the Church would not be the focus for his own spirituality.<sup>4</sup> As a young adult, he states categorically, and at some length, that he is an atheist, and that religion has had its day. In maturity he read the Bible,<sup>5</sup> which he considered quite

beyond belief,<sup>6</sup> out of curiosity (and perhaps a hope that he could believe), and took to referring to himself not as an atheist, but as an agnostic -- and an "Anglican" one at that.<sup>7</sup>

Larkin is often read as if he were a 'closet Christian', perhaps because he knows the right words, not only to name the parts of the Anglican church (as in "Church Going"), but also because he has read the Bible and familiarised himself with its contents. But that this is a misreading is confirmed by Ruth Bowman, who told Andrew Motion that Larkin "'was infuriated by my sense of the numinous"'.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, although he was able to participate in the ceremony, and even to write Christian-style works when it suited him, Larkin's assertion of disbelief is confirmed by his lack of tolerance of Ms Bowman's religious convictions. Furthermore, it would seem to have been Larkin's fondness for ritual<sup>9</sup> and love of the "England" in the "Church of England" that motivates the softer, agnostic stance.<sup>10</sup>

Larkin realises that not all the functions of the church are necessarily religious, and he is able to endorse some of them.<sup>11</sup> In "Church Going" (*CP* 97), he seems to feel that churches are useful as a focal point for "our compulsions", enabling them to be "recognised, and robed as destinies." Some of these hungers send people to church regularly, seeking the impossible. But some people have "A hunger", that comes from within, "to be more serious", and since "that much never can be obsolete," there will always be those who will "gravitat[e] ... to this ground" that is the resting-place of the dead, and a place traditionally considered "proper to grow wise in". Churches would be all right, Larkin implies, as centres of learning and

burial grounds, just as long as they were not connected with the idea or worship of God. The conviction that there is no God, and that religion will soon be passé, relieves him of the need to rail against the hypocrisy of the Church. His manner is detached and cool: clearly he does not feel the need to defend his position against religious dogma, fundamentalism or fanaticism. His “awkward reverence,” then, is not just for the Englishness *per se*, but also for the learning, the tradition, and the beauty that churches represent. This point is not laboured, however, and there is room for a Christian, on reading this poem, to place Larkin in a less unequivocal religious position than actual disbelief.

In contrast to Larkin, Duffy was brought up a Catholic, and was educated for a time at a convent school. There she would have studied not only the Bible, but the lives of the Saints, the catechism, the forms and responses of the Catholic service, and Catholic dogma. Because she has been colonised by the Church,<sup>12</sup> Duffy has ‘rebelled’ in a way that Larkin could not.<sup>13</sup> While Larkin merely observes a “divided” view, Duffy is aware of the shift in her own spiritual focus, so that she is passionate in her debunking of what she sees as Catholicism’s hypocrisy, and is able to observe others attempting similar adjustments. For instance, her speakers frequently struggle to make abstract tenets of Christian doctrine meaningful by linking them to ordinary actions and emotions, and those who ground love in mutuality with their beloved sometimes find transcendence. But Duffy makes it clear that spirituality has a supernatural aspect. For instance, the farmer in “Model Village” (*SM* 21) plants his faith firmly in the soil in an attempt at denial. This



leaves him spiritually dyslexic, suppressing what he cannot interpret, and continuing to “*shovel / deep down,... searching for something*” more than the soil can give.

Duffy raises many questions about Christianity in her poems, but in general her jibes are anti-hypocrisy and anti-Catholic rather than anti-Christian or anti-religious. It is ironic that she writes so much poetry that criticises not only the Church, but its adherents, leaving room for speculation on her own position as a believer, while Larkin, secure in the knowledge that there is no God and unsure of what he should rebel against now that *that* is settled, is not described as an atheist or judged unchristian. The realisation that Larkin was writing at a time when church affiliation was regarded as the norm, and that Duffy writes in an era that is not only more tolerant of atheism, but in which a religious background does not automatically imply a Christian one, increases the irony of their relative positions.

Duffy is moved to anger by matters that are almost non-issues for Larkin. Clearly, Christianity is more a part of late twentieth-century Britain than he, in young adulthood, could have imagined. But Duffy comes close to implying that the Church is built on an inexplicable fanaticism that demands almost total self-absorption by demonstrating that notable Christians have been prepared to dedicate themselves without consideration for family and friends. At the very least, she demonstrates that in any conflict of interests it is duty to the Church that must prevail. The resulting ambiguity of loyalty causes family relationships to break down as families struggle to cope with the impossible demands of their more devout, or more holy, members.

In the second of the “Three Paintings” poems, “*The Virgin Punishing the Infant*” (SM 42), the Virgin, perplexed by her task of bringing this extra-ordinary child up in an ordinary world, “stare[s] / at stars saying *Gabriel? Gabriel?*” Mary is at a loss. In the light of real-life problems, she was not given enough information at the annunciation, so that her task is an impossible one. Not knowing how she should behave, she is forced to make decisions that are somewhat arbitrary. That Mary cries and smacks the infant when he says “*I am God*”, shows that she cannot cope. Perhaps, deep down, she doubts the child’s divinity, and it is clear that she does not want the neighbours to hear him utter what would seem to them to be heresy or sedition. Of course all small children are the centre of their own universe, and behave as if they were God in that they make demands of their parents and expect these to be immediately satisfied. But if this child is verbalising what his mother knows to be literally false, then the realisation that the lie lives on in the child causes her to overreact. If what he says is true, then her story of the annunciation is upheld, and it is for political reasons that she punishes him. In this case, what is remarkable is not that, like the young Larkin and his friend, Mary cannot separate politics and belief, but that this should be required of her: these distinctions, vital to her role as parent of an extraordinary child, are, in fact, impossible to delineate. But if Mary cannot find a way to keep religious and political belief separate, then baby Jesus may not live to adulthood, and her own life is in danger. The only way open to her is to teach the child to keep quiet about his identity and about his abilities: in effect, to teach him to live a double life. Whether

the child is really divine, or whether he believes he is because his mother has said so, the only difference is in the specifics of the lie he must live.

Duffy's poems offer a converse ambiguity to those of Larkin. His poetry stems from atheism yet affords Christian readings. On the other hand, it is probable that Duffy retains a belief in Christianity, while her poetry is open to extreme, atheistic readings: in this case, that while Mary's lover may have told her that he was divine, he was not. There is also the implication that, since Jesus needs, in addition to his divine father, a human father, humans can offer something that God cannot give. Mary, too, needs human comfort. She misses the baby's biological father, and feels she has been, literally, left holding the baby while Gabriel abdicates responsibility both for the emotions he has aroused in his seduction of her, and for the baby's upbringing.

The alleged divinity of his wife's former lover makes Joseph feel inadequate. He has, no doubt, heard Mary's entreaties to Gabriel, and whether the poem is given a religious or an atheistic reading, that he "kept away, carving himself / a silent Pinocchio out in the workshed" implies that he is jealous and that he doubts Mary's story. He must doubt his wife, or doubt his own worth. Because the conundrum cannot be resolved, Joseph seeks solace in avoidance: he avoids his wife's company; he abdicates from all but economic responsibility for the real child; and he uses his trade to uphold his own fatherhood by carving a son of his own, showing that carpentry, too, is creative. That Joseph seeks to replace baby Jesus shows his resentment: either he is not able to cope with the child's godliness, or with the idea of bringing up a troublesome son that is not his own (or both). His wooden

son-substitute, in contrast, is predictable, subject to his control and, above all, indisputably his; but he cannot give it life. Like any human child he might father, this one is inferior to the one his wife already has.

Not only does an examination of the practicalities render the story of Jesus' origins and upbringing suspect, but it demonstrates that even the most exemplary Christian, Jesus himself, made superhuman demands on his parents, and depended on the sacrifice of their peace of mind. Behind every notable Christian, Duffy implies, is an army of family members who suffer in some way through their association with the fanatic. This is in line with the madness of the 'saint' in "Following Francis" (TOC 32), which calls the wisdom of the Papacy into question.

In this poem, the reader meets the "*genius*" himself through the disciple who has left his wife and family to follow his idol. They are a strange pair. Francis does not mind that people think he is crazy, or that he lives without the comforts of a home. The speaker, who is in some distress (at leaving his family? at the power and responsibility of the "choice" he is making? at coming out?), describes the great man's hands as "a woman's". The speaker also notes that Francis reacts in an odd way to his (the speaker's) grief, "plucking my tears off, tasting them." Francis offers the explanation that "*We are animals*," and in the broader sense this is true: given Francis' particular talent it seems likely that he might wish to use what he knows about animals to communicate with humans. Nevertheless, his identification (and his humility?) is incomplete because he preserves his primate status by using his hands to convey the tears to his lips rather than licking his friend, as another animal might.

For the speaker, the effect is erotic, and the sexual dimension of the relationship is amplified by Francis' impracticality, which contrasts with the speaker's own worldly competence, further feminising the Saint's role. The phallic implications of "fumbl[ing] with two sticks" in an attempt to make fire reinforce the idea that these two men are a gay couple. Later, when "we've company," the speaker cannot hide his "jealousy", which, because it "flare[s] beneath dark trees", has the potential to become an inferno, damning body and soul through the uncontrolled and forbidden desires of the flesh. The speaker believes that Francis knows how he feels, and that "he thinks / *I cannot tame this.*" Francis, however, does nothing to help the speaker by placing boundaries on their relationship. Before they "move north" the speaker sends a message to his children, saying, "what I am doing I do from choice." In this way he preserves his autonomous image (and protects St Francis -- and Christianity -- from the charge of luring him away) at the expense of his children, who are left to believe that he is a disinterested parent. The vagueness regarding worldly existence that allows the saint to concentrate on his special talent is also exposed as impractical, since, in a cold country, a vagrant who is so other-worldly that s/he cannot light a fire is likely to perish. The willingness of St Francis to sacrifice his own comforts impinges on his followers, who neglect their own families in order to take responsibility for his well-being.

The poem also implies that some who are now revered and canonised as pillars of the Catholic Church were homosexual, and this questions the infallibility of the Papacy. The same institution that judges some people to be closer to God than other mortals, conferring beatification and sainthood, might well regard these

same people as arrant sinners if they were living today. This reminds the reader that Duffy, too, has made the choice to publicly acknowledge her own position as a gay woman in a strongly heterosexual society. Ironically, St Francis has been spared the need to overcome the legal hurdles and the religious indoctrination and prejudice that face contemporary gay Catholics. Whether there is really any reason to believe that St Francis was gay is beside the point. What matters is the observation that the Church's pre-occupation with homosexuality is recent and selective, and that what the Church seeks in sanctioning only heterosexual, marital and unprotected sex, amounts to institutional prescription of private sexual practices. St Francis demonstrates that even those whom the Church reveres are unable to attain the standard of behaviour set by that same Church for its more ordinary followers, implying that its dogma is flawed and that its goals are impossible ones.

The technique of examining the implied practicalities of stories that are regarded by many as symbolic in function is one that Duffy uses frequently (her treatment of classical myth is another example), but is not in Larkin's repertoire. Instead he tends to make statements about specific areas of religious practice and belief. For instance, he repeatedly makes it clear that he does not believe in life after death or in divine justice, and that, in this life, to sacrifice desires and personal goals in the expectation of a later reward (in this world or the next) is futile. In an early piece of prose entitled "Incidents From Phippy's Schooldays",<sup>14</sup> Phippy is poor and devout, clinging to his faith so that he might well expect to be rewarded for his goodness. But his life is not like that. At school, Phippy has only what he is entitled to by the rules: a small "cell" due fourth formers, and some books. The

books, “‘Prayers in Time of Sickness and Disaster’ by the Reverend Jacob Swill”, and “‘Principles of the Methodist Faith’ by the Rector of Rant”, sound very dull, and the names of the writers, implying as they do pigswill (or hogwash) and irrational ravings, reveal that the real butt of Larkin’s irony is not his character, Phippy, but the religion that underwrites Phippy’s position.

Larkin attacks not only the writings of Christianity, but also its art, by placing, in Phippy’s study, a “huge illuminated text, ‘Christ died for the Ungodly’, which had been freely bespattered with ink by study-raggers”. It is only fair to assume that, since Larkin was not a church member himself, he identified closely with the “study-raggers”; he endorses their behaviour by letting them off scot-free. In the end, Christian justice suffers more than text, art or dogma, because, in contrast to honest Phippy, a wealthier but unreligious character, de Selincourt, smokes an oriental cigarette, has ‘bought’ a study before he is entitled to one, and has Virgil and Homer on his shelves (with the pages uncut -- a reference to the extravagance of *The Great Gatsby*, perhaps).

Phippy has the comfort of his belief, but Larkin shows that this is no real comfort. Phippy’s proselytizing and refusal to take part in the seamier side of college life ensures that (unlike de Selincourt) he is friendless and miserable. Furthermore, Phippy’s narrow moral position makes him so unpopular that in adulthood the only employment he can get is that of teaching the sons of the boys who bullied him at school. These boys follow in their fathers’ footsteps. Phippy’s goodness and humility is no match for the sacredness of the boys’ inherited beliefs, and brings him trouble but no reward. Clearly, he has misplaced his faith.

In “Next, Please” (*CP* 52), Larkin is also blunt in his assertion that waiting for rewards in this life, and expecting there to be a hereafter, are both exercises in futility. He notes that while those who think they have eternal life may sit about waiting for good things to come to them, they wait in vain. Even those who practise patience as an earthly virtue are deceived. “[P]romises” for the future, he says, “refus[e] to make haste” and are, in fact, bogus, because although “we are owed / For waiting so devoutly and so long”, all that awaits us is death. This realisation “leave[s] us holding wretched stalks / Of disappointment” and a sense of loss, because expectations have been aroused but not met. Acceptance of the loss is difficult: that eternity is possible dangles in front of the speaker, not only interfering with his acceptance of his belief that death is final, but also depriving him of the opportunity to enjoy life while it lasts. And in “Send No Money” (*CP* 146), Larkin rejects the secular version of deferred pleasure, saying much the same thing about the authority of wise sayings, such as ‘time brings good things to those who wait’; ‘time heals all wounds’ (and, perhaps, ‘time wounds all heels’); and ‘truth will out’. In this poem, the culprit, the one who fails to deliver, is “Time”, but most humans are quite vague in their understanding of time, relying on the collective memory of sayings such as these to give a stability to its passage. This folk authority, Larkin seems to say, is also a lie because the one truth is death.

In one of his early works, Larkin has a character assert that “Man’s got to worship something. It’s human nature”.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps that is why he contemplates forming a religion, even though he does not seem to think it possible to deal satisfactorily with matters such as death, truth or time. Instead, Larkin says that “If



[he] were called in / To construct a religion” (“Water”, *CP* 93), then he would use light and water. “Going to [his] church / Would entail a fording”: not merely a symbolic cleansing, but “A furious devout drench” that would require fresh, “dry, different clothes”. Such a religion would, no doubt, be as open to misuse as any other, but it is clear that Larkin regards close contact with the elements of nature as the best focus for human spirituality, and there is implied criticism of the Church of England Baptism service where a merest sprinkling of the baby’s forehead is the norm, and the ritual is not repeated. One symbolic washing, Larkin implies, is ineffectual. Water does have a soothing effect on most people, and the literal washing away of dirt and grime *is* satisfying. If Lady Macbeth, for instance, had been an adherent of such a religion, she may have perceived her hand as cleansed, as, in fact, it was. How transgressors would be judged and consciences appeased are matters that Larkin does not attempt to resolve, suggesting that this church will not set impossible goals and then invent onerous and ineffectual rituals to deal with the emotional fall-out.

That Larkin indicates that religions can be constructed is significant, and relates to his question, in “Church Going”: “what remains when disbelief has gone?” If religion is a human construct then it is doomed to be flawed because humans lack the omnipotence and omniscience necessary for the formation of perfect solutions. In this sense, Larkin goes further than Duffy, because, although she is the more outspoken and passionate of the two, she does not suggest an alternative, venture opinions about the origin of religion, or speculate about its absence. Larkin, on the other hand, although he limits his use of allusion, does not

examine Bible stories closely (or classical myth, for that matter). This is in line with his stance on the use of the vernacular; with his belief that poetry should be accessible to ordinary people as well as to the highly educated; and with his personal strategy of avoiding whatever challenges his most cherished ideas. One of these ideas included the prediction, inherited from his father (and therefore sacred), that religion was not only based on a lie, but that religious belief and practices were declining to the point of extinction, if not in his lifetime, then soon after. Larkin fails to note the Church perpetuates itself, a circumstance of which Duffy seems highly aware.

Larkin and Duffy both observe the hierarchy of the Christian Church, noting that authority figures fail in their duty to uphold the moral and ethical values they preach. If, as Duffy has shown, saints and senior church members are inconsistent, then it is likely that parish priests will also fail to live up to their own preaching, and this happens in several of her poems. In “Confession” (MT 15), the Catholic Father frightens the child with references to death, hell and damnation, and “works your conscience like a glove-puppet”. In “Ash Wednesday 1984” (SFN 14), the priest either fails to understand children, or dislikes them. He undertakes to “*put the fear of God in [the child’s] bones*”, and begins by saying that “*St Stephen was martyred with stones*”, conflating “*fear of God*” with fear of violence. It is no wonder, then, that the speaker’s parents “leathered [the child] up the road to Church”, lending mixed messages to Christianity’s catch-phrases such as ‘suffer little children’ and ‘peace on earth’. Clearly, church members are tainted with the double standard. And although the implications of the priest’s words are not followed by action, the

“leather[ing]” administered by the parents has prepared the child to believe that people are violent towards one another, and that some of that violence will fall to her/him. Looking back, the speaker says:

It makes me sick. My soul is not a vest  
spattered with wee black marks. Miracles and shamrocks  
and transubstantiation are all my ass.  
For Christ’s sake, do not send your kids to Mass.

The ambiguities of the last line include the implication that not going to Mass may lead to a more sincere and authentic practice of Christianity. There is room for non-believers or members of other religions, who see all Christian dogma as being more alike than different, to skip the anti-Catholic message and to read the first half of the sentence as slang, and the poem as atheistic. But the anti-Catholic dimension of the reading is reinforced by the parents’ and the priests’ failure to differentiate godliness from fear, implying that one may act as a substitute for the other, and that either can make a spiritual point. That the duality goes to the top of the hierarchy is shown by the fact that the “spanking wains” of the Ash Wednesday service are “The Catholic’s” rather than ‘Catholicism’s’: the Pope is implicated in the bigotry of his representatives.

Duffy does not make an exhaustive study, but she does indicate that it is not just Christianity that fails the young. Children, especially girls, have a difficult time under any belief system that rigidly enforces patriarchal values. In “Girl Talking” (*SFN* 7), the comments are those of Moslem children who unwittingly imply that a traditional practice causes the death of a young girl, Tasleen. If the event is her circumcision, then this is cultural rather than fundamental, and practised only by some groups of Moslems. Again, although the practice is not fundamental, Islam

combines with tradition to endorse ritual rape in a few cultures, and it is possible that Tasleen dies of a fallopian pregnancy. Loss of blood would be consistent with the mysterious pronouncement of the “Holy Man” that “*She went out at noon and the ghost took her heart.*”<sup>16</sup> Whatever the cause of the “pain”, however, it seems that the girls in this poem have little jurisdiction over their own bodies, which are secret not only from others, but from their occupants. In effect, these children have been appropriated by their faith. Tasleen is not given responsibility for her own body, but she is blamed for matters that are beyond her control. The assertion that “From that day we were warned not to do this”, suggests a well-established practice, but that the girls do not know what happened, although they “think it was pain”, and that Tasleen’s mother “held her down”, suggests that these parents, like Christian parents who “leather” their children to improve the quality of their faith, conform to the demands of their priests and are also tainted with the double standards that render belief and reason compatible.

This poem is less explicit than those Duffy writes criticising Catholicism. This is, in part, because Islam is not institutionally unified in the way Roman Catholicism or the Church of England are,<sup>17</sup> but encompasses a diversity of belief and cultural practice (although these may look the same to those for whom it is too ‘foreign’ to be understood at all). In effect, then, there is no unified structure to criticise. So what can Duffy do except what she does -- give voice to individuals who tell their own story, preserving the cultural gap that makes it difficult for white-English readers to understand? In this way, Duffy ensures that her speakers retain their individuality and the personal nature of religious belief and ethnic identity.

This technique affords some protection against the orientalist fantasies often attached to Islam by (white/Christian) western writers and thinkers. It is also possible that, because Duffy is not writing about personal experience, she is unable to comment, and perhaps she is wary of doing so. The contemporary ferment of Islam enables its authority figures to oust monarchies, seize government, and declare holy war, or 'Jihad', not only across state borders, but on individuals. This demonstrates a zero-tolerance for religious (and therefore political) difference, and a penetration of national borders that demonstrates an imperialism similar to that formerly practised by the Catholic Empire.

Islam is difficult to characterise, but Anglicanism is not, and any smugness Protestant readers might feel on reading "Ash Wednesday" must surely be dispelled by the free and easy way that Duffy pokes fun at the vicar in "Model Village" (*SM* 21-2). This man also associates salvation with punishment of the body, but focuses on the sexual, turning his warped belief on himself. Vicars, unlike Catholic priests, are not sworn to celibacy, so that this man has no need to convert his sexual frustration into violence, or to redirect his anger towards the children of the parish. Nevertheless, he is outside the bounds of what is *socially* sanctioned when he says he wants to "*dress up / as a choirboy*" and to have "*The choirmistress ...wear boots and put [him] / over her lap.*" A spanking, he implies, will absolve him from the sin of the "*Smooth pink naughtiness*" he can "*feel / ... under [his] smock*", and he is prepared to commit acts of childish naughtiness, such as "*smoking behind the organ*", in order to make her punish him. Such a flaunting of the rules reinforces his own view of himself as a child. By describing the sexual as naughty, he

conflates adult sexuality with childish mischief, and his wish to be a child in the control of the choirmistress becomes a substitute for his dedication of his life to God, just as the masturbation becomes a substitute for heterosexual contact, and possibly a denial of paedophilia. By centring his identification with little boys on himself, the Vicar avoids the real issues, and, through his simplistic understanding of the cleansing nature of punishment, he simultaneously deals himself a standard of godliness that he can achieve, and negates the need to grow up. He does not even wonder whether his sexual and emotional growth may have been stunted by his faith, or whether his lack of maturity may be stunting his spiritual growth. The clear thinking needed for him to do this would, Duffy hints, leave him dissatisfied with the Church.

Larkin agrees that religious belief is difficult for a clear-thinking person to sustain. In “Under a splendid chestnut tree” (*CP* 43), “The rector clenched his fists / And swore that God exists”. He “Clamp[s] his features stiff with certainty”, exerting a physical effort of will which he combines with a linguistic act. But he is unable to sustain his faith which, within minutes “ha[s] wilted around the edge”. His solution is to ask “‘To die, dear God, before a scum of doubt / Smear the whole universe, and smudge it out.’” The rector is in turmoil amid the beauties of nature and the contentment of his fellow humans, which he alone fails to notice. The poem concludes that what is lost when people “[Take] both voices in old arguments” is “innocence”, and this, Larkin hints, has destroyed the capacity for transcendence.

In earlier, unpublished works, Larkin writes of other clergymen whose lives are at odds with their professed beliefs. These writings are very funny, and meant to

be so, but it is clear that Larkin has observed the duality that leads people to declaim their faith loudly whilst using it as rationalisation for behaving badly, and that this seems worse in the clergy, because they are the selected and trained representatives of a religion that preaches against hypocrisy. In “Ante Meridian: the Autobiography of Brunette Coleman”,<sup>18</sup> (the names are appropriate, considering the dark humour of the piece) we learn that Brunette’s father is a vicar. The family live on a cliff top, and beyond the garden wall is a sheer drop. There is a door in this wall, which the Rev. Coleman has labelled ‘Gents’, and Brunette notes (with suppressed hilarity) that, to date, five boy scouts have disappeared through that door never to be seen again. A civil court may well interpret the Reverend’s action as manslaughter, or even as murder, but he acknowledges no transgression of his religious or moral values. Brunette’s memories of her father continue:

I shall never forget one terrible storm, when ... My father ... had taken me out on the cliff top, in the driving rain, in order to ‘hear the voice of a jealous God’. ‘The voice of the thunder was in the heavens, the lightnings lightened the world: the earth trembled and shook!’ he declaimed in a voice of fury, adding as an after thought ‘Psalm 77.’

Rev Coleman enjoys being associated with the power of God, revelling in the authority and beauty of Biblical language, and only belatedly adding an acknowledgment that the words are not his own. He is prepared to appropriate the Scriptures for his own use, and, as the story progresses, he is moved to laughter by the distress of others. Unsurprisingly, the villagers of his parish demonstrate a similar self-interest. Whether the Vicar sets the standard of moral behaviour or follows the example of the villagers is not discussed, but all, intent on their own ends, fail to uphold the principles of the national religion they publicly espouse.

Larkin shows that he is aware that Church and State work together to reinforce the class system. In a Masque entitled “‘Behind the Facade’ or ‘Points of View’”, he writes:

See the alliance of Church and State,  
 leaning on their garden fences.  
 What are their defences?

He then goes on to relate a conversation between the local vicar, the Rev Incent (Ray Vincent?), who is out for a stroll, and a neighbour, Mr Cranuloid. The Vicar recounts his memories of a comfortable middle class childhood in the refectory, but loses his faith when Cranuloid responds with an account of the horrors of his own poverty-stricken youth, and his continuing misery. The vicar tears off his collar; Mr Cranuloid produces a match, and the vicar burns the collar.<sup>19</sup> Christianity’s implication in the class system carries a charge of unfairness that the enlightened cannot ignore.

Larkin and Duffy agree that mainstream religion has limited value, and that although piety and religious ritual may provide a starting place for processes that are cathartic, secular adaptations are more personal and more useful. This is particularly noticeable in their treatment of death and dying, and in the kind of comfort that their poetry suggests is available to the living. In Duffy’s “Words of Absolution” (*SFN* 32), the rituals and words of Catholicism fail the elderly woman who is slowly dying. Her concentration and her short-term memory are unreliable, and as she counts her beads she manages by replacing some of the abstract tenets of the Rosary with practicalities of her own life. To the question “How do we show that we love God?” she replies, “Never a slack shilling, but good broth / always on



the table.” Faith in the ordinary and the achievable brings the woman comfort. The more abstract of her religious convictions bring the anticipation of purgatory. That she has served in her family home as best she could cannot obliterate Catholicism’s demand that a woman take “Never a drink / or tobacco and the legs opened only / for childbirth”, nor can it assuage the fear that this impossible standard is one by which she will be harshly judged. Original sin and the virgin birth leave ordinary women outside the equation of goodness. The elderly woman’s relatives use their religion to distract themselves from the real issues, saying, “Blessed art thou among women even if / we put you in a home.” The line-break at “if” creates just enough pause for the reader to anticipate that what will follow will be words of comfort for the dying woman -- perhaps a reassurance that she has done her best and will be judged to have used her talents well. But, again, self-deception is hand in hand with self-absorption and an inability to say anything comforting about death.

Larkin is famous for his difficulty in dealing with the idea of death: it is unlikely that any religion he designed would include satisfactory ritual for grieving and the acceptance of loss. Analysis of his poem “The Mower” (*CP* 214), written during times of grief and stress, indicates not only that he lacked adequate strategies for mourning, but also (in spite of his lifelong tendency to define and categorise other aspects of life), that his acknowledged feelings regarding animals became mixed up with his unacknowledged feelings for people. Larkin often indicated that he did not like people very much, except for a few close friends, and it is significant that he was open about his liking for animals. He took their part by opposing, among other things, vivisection and the use of myxomatosis to control the rabbit

population, and he supported the RSPCA generously with donations; but he never kept a pet, and the unfortunate hedgehog is the only animal in which he showed a continuing interest. Monica Jones, who was staying with him at the time, says that “He’d been feeding the hedgehog... [that he] looked out for it in the mornings”,<sup>20</sup> and that its death caused him to be so upset that he howled:<sup>21</sup> a rare show of sustained emotion that is in strict antithesis to his reasoned behaviour when bereft of friends and parents. Clearly, Larkin is so full of emotions which, because he has tended to avoid rather than explore them, are so unfamiliar that he is unable to separate them.<sup>22</sup>

Motion goes as far as to say that the poem “acts as an elegy for his mother.”<sup>23</sup> Larkin has taken care of the hedgehog, almost at the time that his mother ceased to need his filial ministrations, and the animal represents another chance to “be kind / While there is still time”. If his feelings for the animal triggered feelings for his mother, that would be perfectly understandable. If Larkin’s grief was tinged with regret, or anger that her demands on his time and energy had circumscribed his life almost as much as the marriage he had (at significant emotional cost) studiously avoided, that, too, would be easy to understand. Such thoughts are not uncommon in times of grief, and feelings of abandonment often alternate with the idea (however inaccurate it may be) that the grieving one could/should have done more for the deceased. Such thoughts exacerbate the affliction by adding a measure of guilt and shame. And while he does not say so, Larkin is in a similar bind in regard to the hedgehog: he had been feeding the animal, as if it were a pet, and it might well have taken to sheltering in the long grass that had been, and was to be again, his lawn. If

he felt that he had acted thoughtlessly in mowing without checking the long grass, the feelings of guilt would add to any regrets at its death, and any he harboured regarding his relationship with his mother.

Larkin had long ago predicted that he would die at the same age as his father, and he was approaching that age at the time of his mother's death. As he buried the hedgehog, he must also have been thinking about the death of his father and the possibility that his own would not be far off. In a way, Larkin is very like the hedgehog: although he describes his withdrawal into solitude as crustacean or mollusk-like ("Best Society"), the image of a ball of prickles may be even more apt, as it accounts more graphically for his deliberate anti-social facade. It is also typical that he expected the hedgehog to be there when he wanted to feed it, and out of the way when he was busy. This is consistent with his manipulation of human friends, described in the biography, as part of his strategy for protecting his solitude: to keep friendly people near him, but at arm's length.

That "The Mower" refers to grief in general is confirmed by the statement that "The first day after a death, the new absence / Is always the same". In a sense Larkin is right: grief does act in much the same way, regardless of the cause. But it is difficult to believe that a person who had recently lost friends and a parent would really feel the same about the loss of an occasional hedgehog visitor. That the death of a hedgehog triggers an almost unprecedented response of mourning suggests that Larkin's feelings for nature were less complex than his feelings for humans, so that he did not have a ready strategy to deny his grief for the hedgehog. Instead, carried away by his straightforward feelings for the animal, his inhibitions and mixed

feelings are over-ruled, and he is able to express his pain openly. Inherent in this is the idea that Larkin cared about others more than he liked to admit: more than was convenient for him: that he experienced a level of awareness of others that he ignored, or suppressed, in order to pursue his own interests. Larkin may have realised, too late, that he could have done more for his friends, and allowed them to do more for him “while there [was] still time”.

As long as so much remains unacknowledged and unresolved there can be no catharsis, and “Burial”, Larkin says, “was no help”. The hedgehog’s world is “mauled” “Unmendably”, and in the sense that he rejects the idea of an afterlife, and that he could not revive the corpse, this is true: burial could be no help to the deceased. But there is also the sense that his grief is unmendable. Possibly he seeks to salve his conscience, which, in spite of his non-religious stance, would have considered a decent burial to be proper (Larkin’s father, in spite of his atheism, requested and was given a conventional funeral). But if this death and burial recall the deaths and funerals of his family and friends, then the implication is that these conventional rituals have failed to give him a strategy for grieving and catharsis, or even to alert him to the idea that catharsis must be earned. Larkin does not think to turn away from denial, or to set up secular rituals in which he can participate fully, for his own benefit.

There is never a hint that spirituality might be used to call up or direct catharsis, but there is a vague, transitory gift that might afford such relief in “The Explosion” (*CP* 175). Here, at the funeral service,

Plain as lettering in the chapels  
 It was said, and for a second  
 Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed —  
 Gold as on a coin, or walking  
 Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

Even this is ambiguous. Clearly, it helps the wives to think their husbands are in an afterlife where life is sacred enough that unhatched eggs would be there too, but that this revelation even took place is merest hearsay: all the inflationary powers of rumour cannot sustain it beyond “a second”. Grief lasts much longer, and we are not told that the later recall of the vision afforded lasting comfort or assisted the healing process for the living.

Duffy also notes that traditional funeral services have limited success. In “November” (*TOC* 51), the sight of “the funeral cars proceeding / over the edge of the Common” somehow “ruin[s] a day” and “Suddenly” makes “the hour ... less pleasant” as the watcher reflects that it is “far too late for more than the corpse”. There is no gesture powerful enough to help the speaker, who envies the unquestioning faith of an “old woman who crosses herself as the hearse moves on.” In “Funeral” (*TOC* 38), even though “mourners swarmed” in “From all over the city”, the formal religious service and burial procedures fail to make their point, as do lesser rituals of ordinariness, such as “prayers of anecdotes” and ale. These render the mourners “bereaved and drunk / enough to think you might arrive”. Informal and impromptu social ritual eventually succeeds when it becomes centred

on what remains of the deceased in the hearts and minds of the mourners -- laughter and a highly individual linguistic act.

*Say milky cocoa* we'd say,  
you had the accent for it,  
drunk you sometimes would. *Milky*

*cocoa*. Preston. We'd all  
laugh. *Milky cocoa*. Drunk,  
drunk. You laughed, saying it.

The mourners repeat and repeat their mantra, “*say milky cocoa...Milky / cocoa*,” in a polyphony of storytelling “until”, they say, “we knew you’d gone.” This eventually brings the mourners a degree of acceptance of their loss. The refrain, which opens the poem, also occurs as a coda, encasing the description of the funeral in the highly social ritual that succeeds not least because it takes place in the pub -- familiar ground that is a part of the everyday life they shared with the deceased. It is difficult to predict what will succeed -- only a very personalised funeral service can effect a goodbye.

Religious ritual relies to some extent on prayer, but Larkin believes that “no God exists and no intelligence, benevolent or otherwise, takes notice of our lives”,<sup>24</sup> and so he does not present prayer as effective. The women in “Faith Healing” (CP 126) are duped into believing by the con man who preys as he prays, just as the men in “MCMXIV” (CP 127) are duped by the State into treating their signing up for war, a ‘voluntary’ renunciation of their individual freedom, as an occasion for rejoicing: “An August Bank Holiday lark”. The religious implications of “Come then to prayers” (CP 5), are rather vague. The “stone” upon which the reader is invited to “kneel” could be that of the old church floor, a Druidic temple,

Stonehenge, or the earth itself, and the supernatural basis could as well be that of Celtic myth as of Christianity. The feeling of “To a Very Slow Air” (*CP* 13) is also non-specific in its spiritual reference. In spite of the possible association of the “cloven hills” with earthly sin (the Devil is said to have cloven feet), there is no hint of threat, and the sun is the medium of “anointment”. The references to light give the feeling of a great deal of spirituality, but there is no invocation or entreaty that could be interpreted as prayer.

In “Many famous feet have trod” (*CP* 15), although “famous lips interrogated God / Concerning franchise in eternity”, God does not answer; and again it is the sun that can give relief. Sadness is the “Lineage” that can block out the sun, and “It is sanctionable and right / Always to be ashamed of being sad”. If sadness is a “weakness” or, “if there are sins, should be called a sin”, then Larkin has followed the example of mainstream religions and set himself impossible goals that will inhibit rather than enhance self-acceptance, because he places the onus on the individual, who must achieve and sustain a high level of cheer in order to be free of sin. As with the Christian idea that faith, if it is strong enough, can move mountains, failure indicates not a breakdown of the system, but a lack of the suppliant’s own worth. This is in keeping with Larkin’s view of himself as a failure (despite his enormous popularity) and in this he may be seen to be clinging to Victorian Christian practices that demand, above all, humility. Along with this goes the idea that it is those who stand back from the limelight who will be discovered as having real worth. Failure, then, can be regarded as a focus for spirituality in Larkin. His use of the sun as the medium of anointment and his choice of sadness as

the symbol of sin helps to set this up. England is not a particularly sunny country, and if sadness is to be the cloud that hides the sun, then feeling depressed has something to do with being English, and, conversely, sin at the national level has something to do with the clouds of gloom. Politics and religion are, again, inseparable from the national and cultural identity of the individual.

If society and nation are no help, is nature any better? In “Compline” (CP 31), Larkin notes that nature is wasteful, and speculates that prayer may work on the same principle. Therefore, he says, it is

Better that endless notes beseech  
As many nights, as many dawns,  
If finally God grants the wish.

“Compline” is, perhaps, the most hopeful reference to prayer contained in his work, but Larkin remains unconvinced: he does not seem to have tested his own hypothesis.

Duffy, too, seems to regard prayer to God as ineffective, as she writes more about supplication for selfish ends than for spiritual guidance. This (mis)use is depicted at its most blatant in the prayer poems in *William and the Ex-Prime Minister*. These poems are full of irony, and are very funny: Duffy herself has described the collection as “fun”.<sup>25</sup> But in spite of the irony and the slapstick, these poems arise out of concerns that are much the same as those of Duffy’s other poetry, reinforcing the point that invocation and prayer to God is ineffective, whether or not the supplicant is sincere or the request reasonable. In “The Tory Candidate, On the Eve of the General Election, Gets Down on His Knees”, the speaker is power hungry and self-important. He offers God a bribe, saying that if He will “pull a few



strings” to ensure his success in the election, he will “put up the money for the Church roof”. When there is no immediate answer, he becomes enraged, and suggests that God has Communist leanings. This politician regards himself as a Christian with access to Christian rituals and rewards, yet he lacks humility and behaves as if bribery and emotional blackmail were synonymous with fair play. His prayer is a vehicle for self-indulgence and wishful thinking. And in “The Professor of Philosophy Attempts Prayer” (also from *William and the Ex-Prime Minister*), the Professor attempts a kind of wishful thinking that is comparable to Larkin’s belated attempt to attain religious conviction: the attempt to make belief compatible with reason. The Professor’s wish to believe, however, becomes hopelessly entangled with his compulsion to reason, and his prayer turns out all wrong. He ends with a plea to the deity that, logically, he has shown cannot exist, saying “Lord, give me a smidgen / of proof, and I’ll not not not believe in you”. The abstract double negatives of his initial confusion (which, mathematically, would constitute a positive) leave him with a triple negative, and even less hopeful than when he began. He fails to notice that if proof was given it would conflict with the proof that he has, in logic, of the non-existence of God, thus rendering both proofs suspect.

In the “Model Village”, the word of God is similarly unreliable. The verisimilitude of “What God says [that] / can be read in the Bible” is equated with onomatopoeia (“Pigeons say *Coo*. / The church bells say *Ding-dong*”) that is not only inaccurate, but which becomes meaningful only when viewed through the lens of conventional contextualisation. The juxtaposition of “the postman’s dog / waiting patiently outside church” reminds the reader that ‘God’ spelt backwards is

‘dog’, and it is the backward spelling that can be tangibly verified. While the word “dog” has an indisputable quality of thingness, the word “God” can be used as a spiritual focus for worship, or to justify almost any kind of behaviour. Such diversity makes meaning impossible to sustain, and may be a cause, or an effect, of the topsy-turvy state of the Church itself.

In “Mouth, With Soap” (*SM* 44), we learn that “In the beginning was The Word and, close behind, / The Censor, clacking a wooden tongue”, and in “Litany” (*MT* 9), “the soundtrack” is a recitation and response given in language that is directly connected not just to the linguistic sign, but to things that *are* materiality and respectability. In both poems plain speaking, unlike plainsong (which is actually plain only in musical terms, and is usually sung in Latin), is not permitted, and whatever veracity language might offer is destroyed by euphemistic terms used (perhaps invented) to hide the knowledge of self and of the reality of bodily function that reputedly came from the eating of the original apple. Facing these issues would make it difficult to elide the possibility that God left apples lying around in Eden, and has, ever since, allowed his children to suffer the guilt of their injury. This, however, leads to the forbidden conclusion that if God’s parenting skills are no better than those of a human, then God is not much use. If it is the story that is held to be at fault then God’s word is in doubt, and also His capacity for forgiveness and absolution.

Any veracity the story of the creation might have had is compromised by the failure of language. If creation is accepted, then language is part of that, and also part of that which is corrupted by the original sin of consumption. If language is

damaged, then the story of the creation (and of the annunciation), which has come to us through language, is also the story of language's loss of integrity as told by itself: a knowing autobiography that alleges continuing innocence. "The Word", then, may be pure fabrication. At best, the Scriptures are the work of a being that is less than omnipotent and omniscient: at worst, they are stories that are invented well after the fact has been lost. It is small wonder that respectable women in Duffy's poems eschew plain language: the stratagem not only disguises what they regard as human baseness, but, in a way, it helps them preserve their faith. Self-deception is the price these women pay for faith, but the Professor of Philosophy is unable to accept sufficient counterfeit to purchase full membership.

The Church offers eternal life, but sets the example of unquestioning reliance on language: people must blindly follow this lead if they are to gain the promised comfort. But Duffy shows that over-reliance on language is far from comforting, and she frequently comments on the widening separation of words from meaning in ordinary life. In "Small Female Skull" (*MT* 25), she says "*Love*, I murmur to my skull, then, louder, other grand words". But capitalisation and aggrandisement have rendered even these, formerly potent words "hollow nouns" that are of no help. Like the Church, words struggle to retain the authority of that which they symbolise, but, like the ineffectual crossing of the "spanking wains" in "Ash Wednesday 1984", they are devoid of power. The result is a blurring, that in "Moments of Grace" (*MT* 26), forms "A thin skin [that] lies on the language", giving it the appearance of having a body, a mind and will of its own that latches onto "Memory's caged bird", weighing it down and preventing flight. This is related to

materialism, and in particular to identification with “adjectives, [and] nouns”, whereas, when “we were verbs” and action was possible (before the Fall?), there was no need for the “lies” that form the “thin skin” that hides, disguises or sanitises human inconstancy.

This poem is quite personal, beginning “I dream”, and continuing, “I sit”, and “hoping I will not feel me / breathing too close across time”, before a switch to “we” in the third stanza. In addition, the speaker is a writer and shares many of Duffy’s own concerns. Clearly, this poem relates the poet’s own experience as an ordinary woman, and as a gay woman, in a Church dominated by male, celibate intellectuals who often cannot speak the language of personal experience. The Church’s rejection of artificial birth control combines poignantly with a phallic, colloquial reading of the word “skin” (‘condom’) that “lies on the language.” This highlights the patriarchal nature of conventional religious discourse, and reminds the reader of Catholicism’s hypocrisy and lack of humanity. By using language that is ‘protected’ with a “skin”, the Church uses that which it forbids, sterilising and controlling the DNA of its proliferations in ways that are forbidden to ordinary people.

Ritual use of words fails consistently, and one of the issues Duffy is concerned with is the difficulty of communicating in a world where speech and writing so often fail. The over-reliance on words renders the writings of the Church divorced from the experience and sincerity that placed them in context: they have become context. Until this can be overcome, any alternative spiritual focus Duffy can suggest is subject to the same constraints. But words can be reinvested with meaning. In

“First Love” (MT 27), there are “real words”, and their tangibility comes from a high degree of personal involvement and an emotional integrity that is incompatible with double standards, especially of the kind engendered by the vague symbolic/literal confusion that surrounds traditional Christian stories. Duffy seems to be saying that words linked to the literal can lead to catharsis and transcendence, and occasionally *jouissance*, but that words and symbols are not enough.

Where words are tied to memory some of the power of meaning is preserved. In “The Way My Mother Speaks” (TOC 54), the words of the speaker’s mother are repeated, like a mantra that calls up the loved one and offers some salve to the homesickness of the speaker. As with the “*milky cocoa*” of “Funeral”, the words are highly personalised by accent, timbre and intonation and it is the combination of these things (and their basis in shared experience) that secures the ties to memory. In “Hard to Say” (TOC 45), reiteration of the phrase “*I love you*” can regain its lost potency if it is backed up with action that connects the words (prelapsarian verbs with lapsed nouns) to the emotions they describe. And in “The Darling Letters” (TOC 48), the words are tied to a highly personal form of text. These old love letters have lost much of their meaning, so that “Private jokes, no longer comprehended, pull their punchlines, / fall flat in the gaps between endearments”; nevertheless, “Once in a while” a re-reading can send “the heart thudding / like a spade on buried bones.” Clearly, re-reading these letters will not give total recall, but they evoke memories that are powerful enough to alter the physiological processes of the reader.

Duffy seems to be saying that secular prayer is possible, and in “Prayer” (*MT* 52), the world spontaneously yields a prayer of praise of the ordinary. The first part of this prayer “utters itself” not in language, but in action and music: “minims sung by a tree”; “the distant Latin chanting of a train”; “Grade I piano scales”; “someone call[ing] / a child’s name as though they named their loss”. But the latter part of the poem is “the radio’s prayer” that sends the marine weather-forecast to “Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finnesterre”, combining, in language, the power of meteorology and invocation. The mantra of place names, familiar to radio listeners throughout the United Kingdom, acts as a hedge against drowning, and demonstrates that language can be useful as prayer if it can be rescued from corruption. Another traveller’s charm, “Safety, safely, safe home”, lovingly uttered in “Who Loves You” (*TOC* 41), is coupled with directions to “Breathe in and out and in and out easy,” as if it were a yoga exercise for the centring of spirituality within the meditative self. The beloved is advised to avoid “the hole in the sky” and “The loveless man and homeless boys [who] are out there and angry.” Although the poem does not document the homecoming, the last two words of the poem, “safe home”, leave the reader with the sense that the word-mantra is a powerful incantation that has been successful. These prayer-like recitations differ from the formal language of the Church in that they are in the vernacular, and are tied to everyday places or events in the lives of the faithful. They also differ from the Christian concept of prayer in that, although they may invoke supernatural powers in a general sense, they are not addressed as supplication or entreaty to a particular deity, and they depend not on faith, but on faithfulness. Informal but

heartfelt language that is underwritten by experience can succeed where formal religion fails.

Larkin behaves rather differently in his efforts to formulate a spirituality of secularism. He is inclined to connect the failure of prayer with the indirectness of language as a medium for communication, but he fails to call on the semiotic, as Duffy does, to help overcome the difficulty. An early draft of “If, My Darling”<sup>26</sup> reads:

She would stop her ears at reality’s ceaseless recital,  
In its own chaste tongue (like a priest’s drivel at God)  
In which each word is also its own rebuttal.

This implies that the act of prayer is self-defeating because prayer somehow neutralises language. But in the final version it is not prayer, but technical terms that are responsible for the simultaneous ‘rebuttal’ inherent in the use of modern language. Modernisation of Christian texts and rituals is a part of mid-late twentieth-century religious debate,<sup>27</sup> and without insisting on his distance from them, Larkin has come into line with, and made use of, Christian concerns. That this goes unnoticed confirms that there is a fusion of Christian affiliation with English cultural identity.

It is not just the power of language that fails Larkin in his bid to suggest alternatives to established religion, but the ideas that religion should somehow be good for everyone, and that it should involve love, are also problematic. In spite of the watering down of “If, My Darling”, the finished poem gives the feeling that the writer relishes the shock that the beloved would experience “If” she could enter his head. Such an entry suggests an intellectual, immaculate kind of auto or trans-

sexual eroticism. Larkin hints at a secular experience similar to the *jouissance* of the mystics, but with the idea that he retains the authority, tainting the beloved, rather than (as in the case of the mystics) the idea that he is the beloved transformed and uplifted by union with God. He wants to be entered, but he wants to dominate: more than that, he wants to deliver a shock that will annihilate his “darling”’s sense of identity, and muddy her with his own. He assumes that she has no dark thoughts and that she would not understand his. It would seem that this woman represents moral judgement in the abstract, rather than any kind of humanity. This recalls the associations that God and love had for Larkin. There seems to be some level at which he conflated the two, and since one definition of God is that “God is love”, this makes some sense. But to love is human, and if the Christian God can claim all love, then to love is to be colonised by religion: there can be no atheism except by avoiding love.

Larkin’s failure to separate love and God could well stem from a confusion in childhood over the behaviour of his father towards his mother (Larkin describes this as bullying, not as loving), or towards himself. It is possible that it appeared to the young boy that his father rejected both, without differentiation. And it can only add to the confusion that Larkin sometimes conflates God and his father: he seemed to agree with his sister that without their father, they were nothing; he regarded his father’s views as sacred; and, after Sydney’s death, he treated his mother as if she were the high priestess through which he accessed his father (this latter has already been discussed in chapter two). Certainly, he saw the family as demanding, and in the absence of a churchgoing habit, the family, with his father prominent as its head,



could represent the institutional side of religion for Larkin. At the very least, it is inconceivable that his early attitudes to love were formed anywhere but at home.

Among his unpublished juvenilia is a short prose piece which begins by implying that love is a human attribute, and that God created humans in order to learn about adult love. The humans, however, demonstrate love's deficiencies rather than its strengths, and the experiment is a failure. The piece ends with God coming to the conclusion that love is a figment, and He is happy again.<sup>28</sup> It is ironic that, from Larkin's atheistic point of view, he has a non-existent God pronounce love a figment. And it is even more ironic (and rather sad) that he does not reject or counter the idea. Although this piece would seem to have been written in collaboration with two friends, it does illustrate Larkin's ambivalence to love, and suggests that this confusion precludes his discovery of love as a possible vehicle for transcendence. To state publicly that God does not exist is likely to bring recriminations, but at least it has been done before, and there is a name for such conviction. To say that love is a figment is much more risky. Clearly, these are things Larkin could not talk freely about. Like the women in Duffy's poetry, he avoids plain speaking.

Larkin again softens his views of religion for the public in "High Windows" (*CP* 165), and while he does not pretend to believe in love, he avoids saying that he does not. An early draft reads:

... I wonder if people looked at me  
 Thirty years back, and thought I was in luck  
 Not bothered with all that venomous God stuff  
 And worrying about hell and sin and suchlike cock<sup>29</sup>

Both this and the final version represent a sexual revolution that is unrelated to love. But again the final version has left room not only for softer, less anti-religious readings, but for religious readings as well. Without this, the appeal during his lifetime of Larkin's work would have been severely limited, and he would have come in much earlier for the kind of public censure that followed the publication of the *Letters* and the *Life*.

Larkin toned down his poems for publication, but he was roundly attacked when a letter of his was published. His statement that each poem is "its own sole freshly-created universe" upset those who saw the Scriptures as underpinned by (and as underpinning) mythology and the canon, and these three as inseparable from the idea of Englishness. In 1977 (more than twenty years after Larkin's letter was made public), C.H. Sisson described the claim as a "dynamic which puts to shame the hero of the first chapter of *Genesis*". Such a comment might indicate that some religious convictions have been offended, but it is not the implied slur to Christianity that Sisson really objects to, for he makes this point only as an aside when criticising Larkin's rejection of the idea of a "common myth kitty". He goes on to say that Larkin has "astonished the world" with his assertions about myth, so that these should be

perhaps better understood as a piece of autobiography than as a statement about poetry at large. The young man bemused by Yeats had the impression of being relieved of his load of dreams by Thomas Hardy, whose dreams were certainly of a different kind. One might leave it at that, had not the author of this dramatic announcement added glosses which suggested that he was putting forward a critical principle...<sup>30</sup>

Larkin's rejection of myth, concludes Sisson, must have either caused an "asphyxiating narrowness" in his work, or else constitute an enormous "boast". But Sisson's attack does not end there. He accuses Larkin of making a "rather spiteful little point" about the snob-value of classical allusion. Clearly, he regards Larkin's use of the vernacular as a concession to egalitarianism that amounts to an attack on the English class system, and perhaps on Englishness. But it is the idea that myth need not be a foundation stone of English literature that he finds most upsetting. He invokes the canon, saying:

Nobody could pursue his reading of English poetry very far without picking up a smattering, [of myth] and a more intensive reading is likely to take one deeper in.

And he links myth and the canon to the Christian religion again:

Better understand something about the Christian religion if you want to read Herbert or Dr Johnson, let alone such a damned foreigner as Dante, who by the way seems to have been incapable of distinguishing between pagan and Christian mythology...

In one breath, Sisson reveals that his own concept of mythology is linked to his concepts of Christianity, of the canon and of Paganism, and his righteous indignation demonstrates that he regards these as representing the full spectrum of possible religious feeling. Without classical myth, he implies, there can be no empire, no Christianity and no spiritual focus. Sisson's outburst is a graphic example of imperialism and nationalism at work within the community through the discourses of myth and religion, underpinning at the social level the rightness of British colonialist practices. He is not required to show reason or logic, or to reflect on the inconsistencies inherent in his own assertions.

When Sisson was writing this (1977) patriotism was still considered a necessary part of British cultural identity, so that his criticism places Larkin in an untenable position because, clearly, it is a short step from ‘unclassical’ to ‘unchristian’, and from ‘unchristian’ to ‘unpatriotic’. In view of the continuing unpopularity of his remark, it might seem that Larkin showed naivety in making it public, but Larkin thought that he was writing a private letter to someone who would understand his views. Instead, his letter was published, and right-wing reactions such as that of Sisson threatened to force him into an outsider position by claiming that what he rejects is the very criterion for community membership. The discomfort of this kept Larkin on the defensive, and may have interfered with his establishment of the secular and the ordinary with himself as guru.

Basil Bunting appears to have subscribed to the spirituality of the ordinary that Larkin preaches. He comes to Larkin’s aid, redefining ‘myth’, and declaring him a myth-maker. In a sense, then, if myth and religion are seen as complementary, Larkin *has* taken on the role of guru, and Bunting is one of his converts or followers. Although Bunting sees the Scriptures as the English equivalent to the classics and the basis for the canon, he stops short of implying that it is unpatriotic to reject these as sources. Instead, Bunting regards the commonality and sense of identity that Larkin evokes as a kind of myth that is equal to classical myth as a source of authority. This view involves a much wider definition of religion, myth and literature than that espoused by Sisson, and implies a less rigid view of cultural and national identity. Clearly, Larkin has a ‘convert’, who is prepared to interpret his insistence on the vernacular and his rejection of God, Church and classics in ways

that do not render him unpatriotic or damage his cultural identity, but which allow him to retain the credibility he needs.

It would seem that, for all his conservatism on other matters, Larkin is taking a relatively courageous and liberal attitude in his refusal to conform. This is clear in “High Windows”, where Larkin asserts that his generation has made it respectable to reject the idea of sin and damnation, and in “Annus Mirabilis”, finished only a few months later, where he notes that young people of the sixties (he considered himself old at forty-something), had overthrown the taboos of sexual repression. These poems indicate an acknowledgment of a progression towards a less and less structured kind of social organisation, and along with the rejection of a punitive religious affiliation goes a rejection of the compulsory alliance of art with classical and scriptural allusion. Larkin does offer an alternative to classical myth by frequently referring to recurrent or ritualistic aspects of human life (eating, drinking, parties, the family cycle of marriage, birth and death, ceremonial occasions) and of nature (seasons, days, regeneration). Clearly, if these are to be regarded as authoritative myth-making material, then myth and ritual are an integral part of life that cannot be avoided, and if myth and ritual constitute religion, then a God-less, community-based faith is possible. Larkin has succeeded in providing those readers who (free of the rigidity of Sisson) are able/willing to do so, to shift their focus from the sacred and traditional to the secular and contemporary.

At the time when Larkin wrote about his lack of faith in myth as poetic structure, Carol Ann Duffy would have been less than a year old. Twenty-two years later, Sisson and Bunting (and possibly Larkin) must have seemed to her to be

conservative old fogies. But there can be no doubt that, by drawing this kind of fire, Larkin helped pave the way for the kind of debunking for which she is famous: of the male-dominated heroic standard, and the consequent exposure of the double standards that have upheld stories of male glory. By rewriting traditional stories from modern (and disadvantaged) points of view Duffy gives voice to those who were sacrificed, or whose stories were suppressed in order for the hero to be seen as heroic. One person's heroism is, after all, another person's treason, and this becomes obvious when those who are wronged tell the tale: the voice of these 'others' tears gaps in the fabric of traditional thought that has ensured the continuing marginalisation of all but the most powerful groups. This, in turn, further expands the idea of cultural identity by expanding definitions of patriotism and nationalism, so that Duffy is able to write sympathetically from black and Islamic viewpoints without compromising her own identity.

Duffy's Catholicism, Scottishness, gender, class affiliation (although she is upwardly mobile) and sexual orientation all place her outside the centre of power, but England, too, is different for her. Larkin's England was predominantly white, and Hull is far from cosmopolitan, even today. Duffy has been faced with a multi-racial society in ways that Larkin was not. Not only has she lived in London, but she has travelled to many schools to give readings and take workshops. Patriotism, for Duffy, might well include a feeling for the struggles that constructs of class, race and creed place on Britain's black and brown citizens. To expose Catholicism's inconsistencies and the inconsistencies inherent in belief systems in general, then, is not quite enough. Duffy goes farther than Larkin ever did in giving voice, not just

to Catholics, but to those of other religious persuasion not usually (or at least not formerly) associated with England.

Unlike Larkin, whose idea of Englishness (although not as narrow as Sisson's) was not negotiable, Duffy makes room for English immigrant families and their descendants, and gives them voice. Unlike her treatment of her own religion, however, there is an added layer of irony. Not only does Islam (like Christianity/Catholicism) circumscribe the lives of the faithful, but in their day-to-day treatment of Moslems, white Christian Britons betray their own narrow stereotypes and lack of understanding, not only of other religious faiths, but also of their own Christian ethics. For instance, in "Modern Comprehensive" (*SFN* 8), British-born (white?) children make racist remarks about their schoolmates, and the school administration fails to even try to understand Islamic views, or to accommodate its taboos. English law and customs do not take account of Islam in the way they accommodate Christianity, so it is easy to be 'not Moslem' in England, but difficult to be 'not Christian'. Perhaps, because it does not circumscribe her own life in any way, Duffy can give voice to Moslem children without specific comment on the nature of their beliefs. This is in contrast with Philip Larkin, who focuses on buildings (churches, hospitals, libraries), and crowds, describing large numbers of people as all the same: the "Moustached" women in "Faith Healing", the working classes in "The Whitsun Weddings", working class women in "The Large Cool Store", and readers in "Fiction and the Reading Public". By this technique, Larkin suggests that he knows all his countrypeople intimately, understanding their motivations and ranking their understandings of their own lives

in relation to some higher pattern. To invoke this power he need only refer to that which is common to many. In fact, both poets do this, calling on the repetitive nature of ordinary life and focusing the spiritual in earthly cycles or in ritual-like commonalities such as eating, drinking, speaking, lovemaking.

A thorough examination of the ordinary would take more space than is available here (if, in fact, it is possible), but a brief comparison of the poets' treatment of card players, for example, will serve to highlight and summarise their main similarities and differences: in particular, Duffy's partial rejection of the Church, and Larkin's imperfect atheism. Unlike Larkin's, Duffy's card players lack a firm belief that there is no God. These people, uncomfortable with their atheism, fight their need to believe. In "An Old Atheist Places his Last Bet" (*SM* 16), the speaker "hesitate[s]" before he "call[s]" the "last bet", watching "for a king" to appear in "the dealer's vacant place" that is "piled high with chips". He leaves his own card "face down", because "win or lose", "We gamblers do not care". Unable to see the king or the dealer, he "turn[s]" the card, turn[s his] poker face" that betrays no hint of the disappointment he feels, or the hope he still harbours that the life "chips" he spends are being gathered by a benevolent entity that will look after him. And in "A Shilling for the Sea" (*TOC* 44), a glance at the night sky reveals "that gambler's throw of stars", suggesting that luck is a formative influence in the universe. Only a gambler would rely on luck. Of course, if God is a gambler, then the human gambler is in His image and has a 'chance' of salvation.

The soldiers in the Falklands ("Poker in the Falklands with Henry & Jim", *SFN* 54), also confuse their game with their beliefs and their cards with their lives.



The three of them are their own trinity “while outside *the real world* / shrinks to a joker.” The “*real world*”, then, is comprised of the individual, and it is the individual who is real, not nations or governments. But the chips are in the hands of nations and governments, and the individual, like the joker, is excluded from the game. The men, encased in their submarine, are swallowed by their nation, and this is the only position from which war can be justified. They know that they could die at any time, and that while they gamble with cards, their nation gambles with their lives. Whether their nation cares and whether there is a God to care about them or about their nation are questions they cannot ask. Concentrating on the game at hand reminds the soldiers of these questions, but it also distracts them and helps them to invest their belief in the idea of luck, which, unlike God and the Government, is at least impartial. The card games are a ritual that, for a while, wards off fear, but as “*the final card*” is played the players remember that they, too, may end at any moment. The last line of the poem: “*God this is an awful game*”, sums up the ambiguities of the players’ position.

Card games remain secular for Larkin, and in “Continuing to Live” (CP 94), he plays with the idea that shuffling the pack would make life bearable, because “if the game were poker,” “You might discard” unwanted cards, and have the chance to “draw a full house!” But a winning hand is not a matter of luck, he says, because life is not a game of cards, but “chess”, a game of strategy and intellect. It is not the idea of taking a chance that appeals to him, but the idea of getting a “full house”. He is not a gambler in the sense that Duffy’s gambler is: Larkin gives no indication that he realises gambling involves choices, and that choice must be to

take a risk. Whether the new cards are better than those discarded or not, for Larkin they represent a loss, a giving up. There is also the feeling that Larkin believes he would fail to get a “full house”, or any other winning hand: it is not consistent to be lucky *and* a failure. He also excludes the idea of gambling as a path to fate, omen, predestination or divine intervention. In the later poem, “The Card Players” (*CP* 177), the cards themselves are not important, and luck is not mentioned. As with his more obviously spiritual poetry, it is the elements, “Rain, wind and fire!” that provide the quasi-religious focus, and the cultural identity of the players is vested in “The secret, bestial peace” that enhances their own earthiness. These are linked in the ritual of the ordinary that surrounds their card playing, embedded in the drinking and socialising that accompanies such occasions.

The stories on which these poets base the myth-function that links cultural identity with spirituality are largely contemporary and without heroes, and the associated ritual and invocation frequently fail or malfunction: it may be this, as much as anything, that readers identify with their own experience. Here, the responsibility for the failure rests at least as much with the powers invoked as with the supplicant. This differs from classical myth, where failure is associated with a lack of strength or heroic qualities, and from the Christian Saints, who demonstrate that if one just believes strongly enough, miracles can be made to happen.

Larkin is able to point to alternative strategies, because he regards religion as human invention, evolved to fulfil a human need, and assumes that although the need will remain, its manifestation may alter. He presents his poetic function as a God-substitute, and himself as a prophet pointing the way to the elemental through

the basic truths embodied in his work. The constants he presents are death and failure, and the latter is linked to the English psyche in a way that underwrites cultural identity. Although he separates himself from the Church, and sees the hypocrisy of the clergy, because Larkin does not continually and openly dissociate himself from Christian dogma, readers who wish to do so may assume his beliefs to be compatible with their own. The implication that he is usurping the position of the Almighty creator is noted by literary critics, but it is the association of the Scriptures with the canon, with the classics and with national and cultural identity that makes the statement controversial. His inability to separate love and God, and his attempts to reject both, go unnoticed. It is possible that, rather than being an Anglican agnostic, Larkin is an Anglican atheist, clinging to and using the culturally embedded quotient of the religion, whilst rejecting the dogma. His insistence on the finite nature of life and the autonomy of modern poetry from its classical heritage has contributed to the development of a more tolerant climate, so that Duffy is acclaimed for social comment and personal growth that was not possible for, or sought by, Larkin.

Duffy does not reject the idea of a benevolent God: it is not necessary for her to do so, because the classics, the Scriptures and the canon are no longer joined at the hip. She is able to work to expose double standards that underlie the Church's power structures and processes of domination without adopting an atheistic stance, and without raising the issues of the veracity of belief or of Christianity as a system of belief. But like Larkin, Duffy notes the incompatibility of faith and reason, and the common practice of hypocrisy in upholding belief. She is particularly severe

towards those who, educated in the faith and called on to minister to the faithful, manipulate these inconsistencies to serve their own ends. The conclusions she draws about how this is done leads her to explore the ordinary and its links to sincerity as an alternative that can offer a more effective, just and accessible alternative.

Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy know their Bible; but, rather than flaunting this knowledge to give credence to their own assertions, both site themselves as higher authorities, critical of the older writings. Although they make use of the architectonic structures of mainstream religion to access community networks, instead of mediating between the reader and an institution or deity, these poets challenge established religious structures, in what amounts to a rejection of accepted practice and dogma. But for two poets who have rejected overt adherence to established religion and the ritual practices that go with that, Larkin and Duffy would seem to be very spiritual people. Ritual and invocation is celebrated and implied throughout the major part of their works. Each relates to their own contemporaneity, evoking identification with readers: so much so that both have been acclaimed as the voice of their respective times.<sup>31</sup> That Larkin and Duffy can both be hailed as representative indicates the possibility that what has been lost in the rejection of established religion is either not a necessity, or that it is recoverable by means other than a return to the Church. In other words, the specific belief systems that have overridden and circumscribed western thought relate to values which reside in the familiarity of the ceremonial and the ritual or repetition that reinforces the collective memory, and these poets act as guru, speaking out about the

falseness of mainstream religion, and capable of invoking and conducting a ritual of the ordinary through which religious value can be reclaimed and repositioned. Thus Larkin and Duffy, who between them have most of the twentieth century covered, have taken on the role of guru, showing the way to a more secular focus for human spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> Some diary pages are loose in the book DPL(2)/1/1/10. This is a book of pasted-in typescript, with a note at the front to say that these are extracts of ms of 39-40 (winter) and the rest are to be burned, although they have all been religiously kept up to now, and dated March 7th.

<sup>2</sup> DPL(2) 1/2/13, 1. This document is a reporter's notebook, with some pages torn out and a lengthy piece of autobiographical writing rather like a letter to the older self, the adult child or the reader of his works.

<sup>3</sup> DPL(2) 1/2/13, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> In DPL(2) 1/2/13, Larkin writes:

In the first place no God exists and no intelligence, benevolent or otherwise, takes notice of our lives. The belief in God was born of fear and ignorance, and fostered by the memory of childish trust in one's father; now that these motives have been exposed, the tradition is dying, with its great main stem of inherited practice and adornments, right down to the tiny dispersed twigs of children's services on Sunday afternoons and Christmas cards. I am one of the first generation never to believe that Christ was divine, or that each man has an immortal part, at any stage in their first twenty-five years.

<sup>5</sup> *Life*, 485.

<sup>6</sup> *Life*, 486.

<sup>7</sup> *Life*, 485.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Bowman is quoted in *Life*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Life*, 486.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Day suggests that Larkin "valued Anglican liturgical practice, perhaps because of its 'Englishness'." ("That vast moth-eaten musical brocade": Larkin and religion", in *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, [Essex: Longman Critical Essays, Longman Group UK Ltd, 1989, eds Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey]), 92.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Day suggests that Larkin's work is religious "on the grounds of the traditional teaching '*Ubi caritas, Deus est*' -- where love is, there is God" (92), and argues that he presents the reader with a secular version of Christianity. A counter argument might be that Christianity requires the acceptance of the divinity of Christ, and that since Christian ethics are not peculiar to Christianity, any secular version is a variant of Atheism. Day seems to define religion as the repository for love and spirituality, whether this is secular or divine. This supports my claims that the collapse of the British Empire should lead to a broader view of religion in Britain, and that the separation of the religious from the cultural is fraught with difficulty. But if Englishness is to be deposited in the bank of Anglican ceremony and ritual (as Day seems to be suggesting), people who adhere to other religions or to other variations of Christianity will continue to have their versions of Englishness marginalised.

<sup>12</sup> The papacy and Roman Catholicism form an empire that permeates the boundaries of States formed on belief structures that are often incompatible with its own, and is, therefore, another form of imperialism to be resisted in the struggle for postcolonialism.

<sup>13</sup>In DPL(2) 1/2/13, Larkin seems to think that people who believe that one ought to have a religious upbringing in order to have something to rebel against later are not thinking deeply enough. He says:

And we have not even had the pleasure of overthrowing the beliefs of our fathers. They did the overthrowing, and we are left with the result. Along with this goes a certain regretful envy of the religious position. Some years ago I remember reading a statement by somebody of youth bewailing their lack of things to believe in.

Most of my friends - the acquaintances rather than my few close friends - hold that if you are lucky you are brought up to believe in some form of God, while at the same time they think that such a belief can only be held by the simple. In consequence their position is a divided one.

<sup>14</sup> DPL (2)/1/1/2, Incidents From Phippy's Schooldays [sic]

<sup>15</sup> DPL(2)/1/1/12, "Story I" dated January 1941.

<sup>16</sup> I wonder whether the moon may be associated with paleness. For instance, if the girl bled to death then her appearance would be pale relative to her usual skin colour.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam* (New York and Toronto: Random House, 1982), 3.

<sup>18</sup> DPL(2)/1/13. This work is dated 1943, dedicated to Miriam and Diana, and entitled "Michaelmas Term at St Brides (being a sequel to "Trouble at Willow Gables") by Brunette Coleman." "Ante Meridian" is contained in the same book. Both works are hand-written.

<sup>19</sup> DPL(2)/1/3/1, "'Behind the Facade' or 'Points of View' a Masque intended for performance on midsummer's Eve ... All characters are non-existent".

<sup>20</sup> *Life*, 475.

<sup>21</sup> *Life*, 475.

<sup>22</sup> Larkin set out to take the normal day's activities the day after his mother died, putting on a brave face, and saying that "life must go on" (*Life* 465-6). This stoical attitude (although in some ways heroic) indicates that he was not in the habit of allotting time to experiencing grief.

<sup>23</sup> *Life*, 476.

<sup>24</sup> See note 4

<sup>25</sup> In conversation with the writer, 30/6/97.

<sup>26</sup> Workbook 1 (no page numbers). A micro-film of this book is held at the Brynmor Jones Library in Hull. The original is held in London.

<sup>27</sup> Basil Bunting, for instance, laments the loss of power of the Scriptures, and attributes it to the "journalistic" modern translation that replaced the King James version (*Agenda* Vol 15 Nos 2-3, 11. Summer-Autumn 1977).

<sup>28</sup> DPL(2)/1/3/7, "'Songs of Innocence and Inexperience' by P.S. Brown, Edward duCann, Philip Larkin".

<sup>29</sup> DPL 9 Workbook 7. [1/6] 6 Oct 64 - 10 Jan 72, 17 (dated 3.3.65).

<sup>30</sup> Sisson, C.H., "Poetry and Myth" in *Agenda* Vol 15 Nos 2-3, 11 Summer-Autumn 1977. 27-33. This issue is a special issue on myth.

<sup>31</sup> Dr John Osborne, editor of *Bête Noire* (the first journal to carry a full-length essay on Duffy's work), told me that he regarded Duffy as voicing the concerns of his generation. Sean O'Brien of *The Sunday Times* wrote: "So often with Duffy does the reader say 'Yes, that's it exactly', that she could well become the representative poet of the present day, much as Philip Larkin came to seem for the time between Atlee and Thatcher." This appears on the cover of *Mean Time*, and was quoted, in part, in the handout to the hundreds of school pupils that gathered at Leeds for a poetry day in preparation for their studies for the GCSE examination. The handout is entitled "Updates: NEAB GCSE Poetry Day - Leeds, 30th June 1997".

## Chapter 5

### **Lands of Hope and Glory: Putting People in their Place**

Regarding a project as underwritten by the Scriptures multiplies the ways in which it may be legitimised. A side-effect of this solidifying of authority is that the gaze of the 'enlightened' is always privileged, so that seeing and representing becomes a vehicle for the furtherance and ordering of the imperialist project. The gazer interprets, attaining a state of knowing that can be recorded and regarded as authoritative without any reference to the perception of those who are viewed. This is problematic, because the records produced can be possessed literally as archival "Tomes" that (like those in Carol Ann Duffy's "Model Village"), although they seem to "do no harm", capture the subject in time and space. While territory and earthly space can be regarded as human universals, they are always understood and represented through filters of point of view and concepts of time and distance. In human terms time and space are inseparable because even while there is apparent stasis there is also a continual process of change: even while there is apparent change, some things remain the same. Blurring of the boundaries between alternative realities -- the physical, the representational, that of the viewer, that of the viewed -- occurs, making an implied appropriation inevitable. Clearly, then, another way for monarchs of paper empires to render "lives with no sense of plot" more predictable is to chart their physical environment and critique their customs.

In general, Philip Larkin seeks to preserve an idealised version of the past which, in turn, draws much of its authority from traditions of its own past and cannot be supported by reference to the international, societal, intellectual or epistemological changes occurring in the world around him. Larkin does not acknowledge that this past is divorced from the present, or that it makes the present seem fragmented and foreign, so that what he accentuates is the possibility for stasis. Carol Ann Duffy, however, seeks to take cognizance of other points of view, and because these 'other' viewpoints are fragments of her own society, she insists on the changing nature of that society. As poet/observer/tourist in the lives of others, Duffy gives respect by taking account of realities other than her own as she moves over her speakers' distance and time, into their place. The center of reality in her poems is that which the speakers proclaim for themselves (although some speakers dominate and oppress others) and the point of view that others are worthy to speak is the one the reader is encouraged to give credence.

But Larkin's attempt to preserve causes him to silence others as he appropriates or overwrites the space they rightly occupy. In his bid to deny alternative realities he cannot sanction, he tries to control time, especially the past, failing to realise that the control art offers is at best symbolic, and at worst oppressive. Although to sustain the present proves impossible and the more detailed his representation is, the sooner it becomes history and exerts its power to evoke a past, he perseveres in his attempt to preserve a version of the environment that best fits his own, unchanging view. This process can be seen in "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (*CP* 71), where he attempts to use the photographs to



capture versions of the present they collectively represent by mentally accepting the shading as real depth and each instant captured as real time. That Winifred (the young girl in the photographs) is sitting there with him<sup>1</sup> does little to interfere with his mission: he simply accords the photographs a superior degree of real-ness, writing her completely out of the poem that is to be his record of the occasion.

Larkin attributes this poetic record a greater authority than that of other kinds of archive, because its source, photography, is “as no art is, / Faithful and disappointing!” It is faithful because it is lifelike, capturing depth and “blemishes”, such as “washing-lines” and “A chin as doubled when it is,” but disappointing because it insists on the reality of “hold-it smiles” that the discerning viewer can see are “frauds”: in other words, because there has been no artistic censoring of the subject. Such faithfulness is not always desirable, then, and Larkin takes advantage of this by not remembering or reminding the reader that the subject is reduced to a flat, static perishable, without life or volition. Larkin encourages the reader to adhere to the discourse of the day that regarded the photograph as accurate, without examining the underlying assumption that it is permissible to possess “All [her] ages”. Regarding photography as more authoritative than other textual renderings defuses the urge to question, but it cannot stop or turn back the clock, and Larkin is only able to “choke” on the images that are “too rich” for him to digest. He cannot stomach the responsibility of possession, and instead of capturing the subject in a way that preserves the many instants the photographs represent as viable versions of the present, he consumes the images that he “hungers” for; an action that is, in itself, inherently connected with the passage of time.

While Larkin's aim is to hold the past by focusing on an unchanging picture in a way that would negate change, the actual effect is to accentuate the change in his subjective perception of that (empirically unchanging) picture, as time goes by. Larkin captures the past only as an illusion he is not able to participate in, or to control. He can never really be part of the photograph's past, static world, and to continually or repeatedly experience the picture as present he has to place himself in an ever increasing degree of dislocation to his own existence: as he and the photographs become older, they are both further removed by time and experience from the instant captured on film. The location may remain, but in the sense that place is a personal and internalised concept of location, the place, too, has changed. But because this place is Winifred's, and not one that Larkin has ever known, he is able to accept the representation as a means of symbolic access and occupation. His gaze thus becomes a link not only to the picture, but also to the disjunction of the picture and the actual present of his own experience.

Duffy agrees that although photographs may trigger memories, they do not provide a map that is any help in negotiating the present. Time separates the speaker in "Before You Were Mine" (*MT* 13) irrevocably from the people in the photograph. Here the speaker is "ten years away from the corner you laugh on / with your pals...." Time passes, but unlike distance and location, it cannot be retrieved. Duffy links time and distance so closely here that it is difficult to separate them: in a sense distance *is* time, and neither can be recalled. This is noticeable in many of her poems, where sometimes it is time that dominates distance, and

sometimes it is distance that controls time. Both are frequently presented in a complex relationship with place where each acts on, and is affected by, the others.

For Duffy, distance is often augmented by a kinetic aspect which is frequently coupled with the idea of a reciprocal arrangement of time and place, and, occasionally, all these are integral to the body that experiences them. In “Away from Home” (*TOC* 49), “The train unzips the landscape” as it moves through time and place; and in “The Dolphins” (*SFN* 58), “World is what you swim in, or dance...”. Movement can also involve an acceleration through the foreshortening of both time and distance that gives the feeling that it is the environment and not the traveller that is moving. In “Originally” (*TOC* 7) the “red room / ... fell through the fields,” and “the miles [rush] back to the city” as the city reclaims its own. In “Practicing Being Dead” (*SM* 9):

This is the place.  
Those are the big oak doors. Behind them  
a waxed floor stretches away, backwards  
down a corridor of years.

Again, the foreshortening of time and distance results in the speakers, rather than the place, maintaining a fixed point in space, and the distance becomes an historical movement of territory back in time away from the ‘now’ occupied by the speakers. These speakers are powerless to keep the landscape of the past, or even that which they currently occupy, with them, so that they must become their own reference points.

Like Duffy, Larkin also talks about time and distance together, as if they were inseparable, but appears to have different ends in mind. In “Whatever Happened?” (*CP* 74) he says that “At once whatever happened starts receding”, and the next day

“All’s kodak-distant.” “Whatever happened” continues to recede away from the experiencers until all that is left is “just a latitude”: a textual record consisting of an arbitrarily drawn point on the map. This written account lacks detail and has an aspect of fiction that cancels the need to remember the unpleasant event. In “The Whitsun Weddings” (*CP* 114), Larkin travels south “All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept / For miles inland”. “And [that] the wave sings because it is moving” (*CP* 6), shows that, although communication usually fails, language, or at least sound that might be language, is incorporated in the equation. In “Heads in the Women’s Ward” (*CP* 194), those who are close to death, a state Larkin sees as a kind of non-existence, have lost their power to articulate and “[talk] silently / To someone no one else can see.” This someone is a no-one, who is everywhere yet nowhere: whether the sound is language or not, no meaning can be communicated. Music, though, takes on a material stability, and in “Two Guitar Pieces” (*CP* 8), “A chord gathers and spills.” In part II the “language” of the “six strings” reveals that while the music lasts it “builds within this room a second room” that, although it is three-dimensional and exists in time, is as impossible to capture as the “happy stirring of the air” that built it. Sound, then, may be represented as space, but it is ineffective to represent space as sound. These rooms may only be occupied while the music continues, for they become ‘unsound’ once the music stops.

The close relationships of time and place also make problematic the use of flat surfaces for the representation of human life and geographical space. In “Education for Leisure” (*SFN* 15), Duffy explores the possibility for the flattening of three-dimensional space, and the significance of this alteration to understanding. Here the

deranged speaker<sup>2</sup> says: “I squash a fly against the window with my thumb. //...and now the fly is in another language.” The speaker knows that language, space, and life are connected, but cannot always negotiate the complex processes required to understand or talk about what he sees, hears, or does when these relationships are altered. He does not speak the language of altered states. Death and flattening are both beyond his understanding, so to squash a fly is to render it not only dead, but also incomprehensible. The flattened body and the mark on the glass are so distorted that neither can represent the fly for this speaker.

That this failure is due to a lack of understanding rather than a rejection of an inaccurate convention of representation is revealed by the inconsistency that follows. Although the speaker says that the fly has been translated, he is able to “breathe out talent on the glass” and inscribe his own name on a two-dimensional surface, using a medium that is, at best, transitory, without changing or losing the language he associates with himself. The fly loses its veracity or ‘flynness’ once squashed; but the breath, or inner lung space of the speaker, which is also represented on a flat surface, can be used to map or inscribe himself. Somehow the latter is not problematic. Simply being able to recognise the mark he makes and to associate it with a convention of self changes everything.

This inconsistency in understanding is only partly attributable to the breakdown in the speaker’s own mental processes, however, because the leap from a three-dimensional physical reality to a two-dimensional representation necessitates the acceptance of distortion. A mark made by a squashed fly on a window pane cannot really be a fly any more than bloodstains on the road are the accident victim.

This is obvious, in part, because of the literal disembodiment of a living creature, and perhaps it is this that prevents the speaker from extrapolating from this information the idea that all textual representations of the physical world are similarly flawed.

Two-dimensional representations of things that are not two dimensional are textual productions of human thought. These images, therefore, can be manipulated by human thought and language in a way that allows them to be possessed as static images or as fast moving compressions. In “Mrs Tilscher’s Class” (*TOC* 8),

You could travel up the Blue Nile  
with your finger, tracing the route  
while Mrs Tilscher chanted the scenery.  
Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.

Although the student has not left the classroom, the cumulative effect of the physical experience of “tracing” while the high priestess is “chanting” produces a ritual described as “travel”. The traveller covers thousands of square miles with the touch of a finger, while experiencing the authorised version of the scenery second hand. In “Ape” (*TOC* 20), the speaker looks at “a male silverback on the calendar” and “the jungle” he occupies, and fancies that as “you tear off / the page.../ ...you crumple a forest in your fist,” showing the opposite effect. This time the area presented is very specific, but the gazer extends this, perhaps because of prompting by the artist who has, inevitably, projected some messages of their own into the picture. Textual representations, then, are subject to distortion not only by the artist or cartographer, but also by the viewer. When viewing space and its contents, gazers control the way such aspects as distance, change, time, volition, response, point of view and

behaviour are perceived, because what is seen is the projection of the gazer's own desire, fear, or expectation.

Without these external aspects, charts and maps are merely records of empirical data, and, like the mark of the fly, remain quite meaningless. In order to make the chart useful the beholder must take the data and organise it into systems of thought that contain whatever else is known (from experience, reading, hearsay and the like) and mentally construct a picture of a physical reality that relates to the chart in such a way that the user can negotiate the actual territory. This may be done in either a physical or imagined actuality, but in every case, knowledge which is outside the chart itself is necessary. Any attempt at incorporating time and change into the picture may add to its accuracy, but such knowledge can never be complete, and may just as easily add to the distortion. Even in a sea chart, where time and behaviour are important, there is no way that any but the most general or the most predictable and cyclic of changes can be included in the data. Unless a sea chart is coupled with physical experience and memory it is of limited value, and only an idiot would imagine that being able to read a chart would be enough to ensure safety at sea or arrival at a particular destination.

Clearly, then, Duffy's speaker in "Education for Leisure" was right when he said the fly was "in another language." That does not mean that no understanding of the squashed fly is possible, however -- only that *he* could not understand it. This is demonstrated when, in the same stanza, the speaker's ability to manipulate textual representations of himself is contrasted with his failure to understand Shakespeare, which he says "was [also] in another [dead] language". Because the reader knows

there are ways in which dead languages may be understood, it is evident that the speaker of the poem is trapped by his inability to empathise with other selves as historically stable entities. Because of this he cannot understand death or the dead fly. He is anchored firmly in the present because he cannot incorporate the change in state of the creatures he kills by linking their dead state to their living past through language.

The speaker is like a conqueror who fails to understand or value the culture, history and heritage of the territory he occupies because he persists in regarding his own point of view as the only one. Like a conquistador, the “genius” he asserts is a desire to “play God” by “chang[ing] the world” through an escalating pattern of violence and destruction of life into a form he cannot understand and can, therefore, dismiss. This person is mixed up and dangerous, and this is somehow related to his inability to deal with the way language and the occupation of space are related in such a way that altering one automatically alters his own relationship to the other. He appropriates lives through destruction, and his refusal or failure to partake of the usual methods of appropriation has led to more obviously dire consequences than those associated with the gazer. His actions have a didactic potential with a positive side-effect for the gazer/reader, who can feel exonerated for any inaccuracies or injustices that are perpetrated only in the imagination.

Language, bodies and space are again presented as linked in “Job Creation” (*TOC* 16) where the great “Gulliver” of industry has not brought the promised prosperity. Instead “His snores are thunder in the night” and “we reckon they have drugged him / or we dream he is a landscape / which might drag itself up and walk.”



This landscape has been subject to abnormally rapid change, but the expected economic progress has not occurred because the giant seems to be characterised by stubbornness, lack of cooperation and a voracious appetite. Thus, although the landscape has acquired a semblance of volition, it is incoherent, made unaware of its own failure by drugs that negate the volition or render it unpredictable. Desirable change, therefore, is unlikely. It is not the place that will save the people, but the people who must save the place in order to save themselves. The Gulliver-landscape dominates the inhabitants and fails to deliver the promises that induced the locals to permit access to the area.

The Gulliver-industry is the colonising body that covers the landscape, and is the inverse image of the body-colony in that it is superimposed. Bodies are space that are often visually defined by their cladding, and “fashion stakes out the body as its territory.”<sup>3</sup> Larkin comments on this in “Skin” (*CP* 92), saying:

And pardon me, that I  
 Could find, when you were new,  
 No brash festivity  
 To wear you at, such as  
 Clothes are entitled to  
 Till the fashion changes.

Clothes, then, are the trappings that not only encase bodies, but that replace them in importance and rob them of their aesthetic due. It is the clothes that occupy the bodies when fashion is a factor, rather than the other way about, and there was a time when industry seemed desirable: a time when it was in fashion.

Even when high fashion is not a factor, the cladding provides information that the gazer uses to assess, classify and map that body through discourses that mediate such matters as gender, taste, class and socio-economic status. The significance of

body coverings, however, changes with their having been worn habitually. By this time they are no longer fashion, but intensely personal casings. In Duffy's "Saying Something" (*SFN* 18), it is "the plain and warm material of love" that supports the things that "assume your shape; discarded clothes, a damp shroud / in the bathroom, vacant hands." As in any survey, the dimensions of time and space have fallen in on themselves. But the data is more useful than that in "Education for Leisure", because the physical knowledge the now "vacant hands" have gained enlightens the reading of the spaces charted by the "discarded clothes" and the "damp shroud", compensating for the difficulty of including synchronic and diachronic data in the same chart. These readings are also mediated through a "private language" that "starts the day". This language is not totally reliant on verbal communication, for it is enriched by the kinetic and tactile dimension of both the "familiar movements through the house" and the "Pedestrian daylight terms" of the speaker's relationship. The comprehension of the space charted by the unfilled clothing involves the linguistic and tactile faculties and a kinetic aspect that has predictable, cyclic implications, providing a key, in a relationship that is similar to that of an almanac to a sea chart. Each multiplies and enlightens the possible readings of the absence.

Larkin's insistence on the impersonal robs his readers of such a key. In "Going" (*CP* 3), he writes that it is the garment of evening that "brings no comfort" even when it is "drawn up over the knees and breast." This is a very clear example of the landscape as body with time as garment, but there is no clear delineation between the two in "To a Very Slow Air" (*CP* 13), where "The cloven

hills are kneeling,” to receive from “The sun such an anointment / Upon the forehead, on the hands and feet”. This could also mean that it is the “cloven hills” that are “kneeling the sun” in a way that lowers the rays to bathe the speaker, who is human. Humans are associated, through Christianity, with sheep, but if the Christian allusion is to be admitted, then “cloven” must surely be allowed also to hint at the devil. This body, then, has parts that could be human, and parts that definitely are not human. In “The local snivels through the fields” (*CP* 59), the women on the train have “bones of gossip” and these might be part of any creature. The bones and the gossip also introduce the “clack” that is not only associated with the ancient musical bones, but with the sound of a train as it counts the distance/time travelled “Past all the seven stations back.” In “Sunny Prestatyn” (*CP* 149):

Behind her, a hunk of coast, a  
Hotel with palms  
Seemed to expand from her thighs and  
Spread breast-lifting arms.

Body and landscape are interchangeable: it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

Both Larkin and Duffy talk of time and distance as inseparable, and only the insane can afford an escape from the separation from place that the passage of time invokes. Duffy’s speaker in “Psychopath” (*SM* 28), for example, exhibits a degree of control of time that is obviously a delusion, when s/he turns “the world faster, flash.” The inability of the human to capture place and time together is no reason to stop trying, however, and many visual arts are based on the attempt to do just that.

Exactly what is captured and the relation the representations hold to their subjects or models is explored in “Standing Female Nude” (*SFN* 46). Unlike

Browning's "My Last Duchess" which is written from the point of view of the possessor of the painting, this dramatic monologue comes from the point of view of the model. It is the "Six hours" that she spends posing, naked and a little too cool to be comfortable, that is important. She does it for the money, and thinks about how "The bourgeoisie will coo / at such an image of a river-whore" and "call it Art." She visualises "the Queen of England gazing / on [her] shape" and describing it as "Magnificent." This is doubly ironic, firstly because the model feels no artistic connection with the painting: she has had no say in its formation, and after it is finished she shows little interest beyond remarking that "It does not look like [her]". She invokes not the artistic construct as a shared motivation, but the economic necessity that drives them both by saying "Twelve francs and get my shawl." She will return to a life that is outside the painting's scope.

It is also ironic that the artist paints compulsively, yet is rated as a "genius," while his model, who shares his society and his poverty, has greater autonomy but is rated as nothing. The representation of her beauty will have more value to society than she, as inhabitant, original owner, possessor and wearer of that beauty, can command. Both sell their services, and the artist plans to present his work as Art, taking all the money and artistic credit he can get for it. The model knows, however, that Art is related to Artifice, and that the flat canvas means nothing compared to a living being.

There is also another level of irony that is more overtly political. The Queen of England and the Commonwealth, and former monarch of a wide-flung empire, may only look on and appropriate the painted image with her gaze. The model

herself is safe from such colonisation, partly because of the inability of the painter to capture her essential humanity. In a sense the painting is all there is -- it has become a map of a fantastic place: a Shangri-La which has no corresponding basis in reality. This model understands the political structures well enough to subvert their purpose. She is, after all, the possessor of the original artifact that inspired that art, and she is able to dismantle some of the constructs of domination, as they relate to herself, by transferring these to the woman in the painting: a being who is non-existent. Having elevated herself with this knowledge, the model imagines the Queen being duped by the same construct that she, as model, exploits because she does not regard it highly. Artistically, then, the model sites herself above the Queen. The education and authority of the Queen cannot alter their relative positions because the model is privy to information about artistic standards that the Queen cannot accept if she is to retain belief in the sincerity of her own position.

The gaze that this model fears most is the one most near her in terms of time, place and environment: that of the artist himself. Both are united in poverty and “make [their] living how [they] can,” but, nevertheless, “he drains the colour from [her]” and directs her movements while he is paying. What he is buying is her visual beauty which he disembodies. Later he will take the liberty of “represent[ing her] analytically”, like a chart or a diagram of his great artistic powers that appear scientific and hide his charlatanism. Later she will be metaphorically masculinised and killed when her image is “hung / in great museums”, leaving the painting the last and only (because uncontested) word.

The model knows that art is a sensory construction, and that any division of Art from art is merely a convenient way to assert an artistic hierarchy. In the light of this she makes the effort to maintain her regard for herself both as artist and as the possessor of herself as an original artifact. She comforts herself that the “Little man” lacks “the money” to “[possess]” what she owns, and can have her only as a cheap reproduction “on canvas”. He “dips the brush” of his artistic virility “repeatedly into the paint” that must serve as a surrogate vagina, and when he has finished he “shows [her] proudly, [and] lights a cigarette.” Like a hero-lover he takes all the credit for what was really a joint project of artist and model, of employer and employee. She cannot escape the patriarchal or economic constructs, but she understands that “artists / take themselves too seriously”, and moves on, away from representational Art and back into living art.

The inability of the artist to capture the real thing, and what is lost in the translation to linear dimension, is also the subject of “Poem in Oils” (*SFN* 47). This speaker sees the landscape as “air” and “infinite varieties of light.” S/he cannot separate the various sensations that the view affords, noticing time and movement in the variety of the light; in the falling of the shadows; in the way “Muted colours / alter gradually as clouds stir shape”; and in the way his/her identification with the “purple rain / or violet thunderstorm” is so close that it “shudders in the corner of my eye.” Here the body is not only an object to be represented in art, but a medium for the absorption of as many aspects of the landscape as possible by mediating the sight through change, time, and emotion. The body and its sensory perceptions give a rendition of the scene that cannot be displayed: they are not simply to be viewed

at a later date, but remembered as experience. The artist, on the other hand, has a two-dimensional canvas, and while this record may be more lasting, and more easily communicated, it is less faithful to the original. There is little scope for the “infinite varieties of light” in a static picture, and the richness of the observer’s experience is contrasted with the limitations of the artist who merely “stands / upon a cliff and turns [changing] doubt into [static] certainty”. The painted landscape makes these colours seem static even while the artist paints, because in the corresponding place “far below, the ocean fills itself” with the same sky that in the first stanza was constantly changing.

This artist is observed working to capture a landscape on canvas, but the result is inferior to what the observer experiences not as art, but as “the process of seeing.” This observer and the model in “Standing Female Nude” seem to agree that the sensory realisation of the physical world is artistically superior to vicariously experiencing other people’s flattened renditions. These all call, initially, on the sense of sight, but clearly there is an increased degree of fidelity and increased complexity of appreciation possible when several senses are combined. A fly is not a mark on a window, and a landscape is not a mark on a canvas, but the marks can be linked to the originals through a complex “process of seeing.”

“Seeing” is a skill that is developed differently in different people, and Larkin’s “Sunny Prestatyn” demonstrates to the reader the ‘Orientalist’<sup>4</sup> nature of the impersonal public gaze that lacks a kinetic or tactile dimension. The poster is a painting of sorts, a two-dimensional bounded space, simultaneously positing an available future and an enduring past, both of which are hopelessly idealised.

Because the poster is impersonal and made out in blocks of colour with little shading, it is more obviously map-like than a photograph, and the omission of practical details adds to the idyllic nature of the scene. The woman in the poster, like the pink areas on the map that represent the colonies of the Empire, conjures up a desire for adventure in the gazer, because she represents a site that is available for exploitation. As a surrogate colony she feminises the land, allowing the patriarchal structures to operate as part of the posited fantasy. This serves, through invoking the custom of the use of women as sexual icons, to imply that because the power that rules her bodily territory is linked to actual empire, and because the exploration and military or political appropriation that fed the Empire was carried out largely by males, males are included in the imperial power structure of the nation and ought to conquer the woman in order to appropriate her as symbolic territory.

Calling on community systems in this way reinforces the idea that access is readily available, and that it is the duty of the male citizen to accept the challenge to claim the territory. Thus the apparent validity of the billboard as an inferior 'civilization' is easily reinforced by calling on, for instance, the commonality of contemporary thought that regards both the commercial billboard and the Mediterraneanising of the Welsh coast as a double insult to the landscape. Readers are invited to dissociate themselves from this abomination through the use of similar, but less topical, discourses of domination, especially those that allow the appropriation of the female body: by saying that the land "Seemed to expand from her thighs and / Spread breast-lifting arms" Larkin reinforces the association of the



two, so that she is absorbed into the landscape. Her borders, her terrain, her fertility and her availability have been charted.

Although Larkin does not always shy away from words that specifically refer to female genitalia, it is the woman's "crotch" he describes as "fissured". This term is often applied to clothing, and can relate more immediately to her swimsuit, which is visible, than to her genitals, which are hidden. Readers who participate in a system of male dominance are thus given the facility to distance the violence from direct associations with the woman's gender and her humanity. Larkin places her not just "astride / A tuberous cock and balls" as the graffiti indicates, but "*fairly* astride" (my italics). This assertion of justice enables him to say she was "scored well in" secure in the knowledge that the textual reference, and the idea that scoring sexually is *always* positive, would overshadow the clear portrayal of a sexual assault and a guilty victim.

Both the woman and the land are represented in a stylised way, but it is the woman who is defaced, and toward whom the anger is directed. If the poster is deemed not to imply any insult to womanhood, then there can be no insult implied to the locality of the billboard, the North Wales coast or the stolen Mediterranean aspect. But if the violence is an issue, there is a second verbal echelon to deflect the reading that his defence of the landscape has its basis in a misogynist discourse. Larkin presents the woman as a temptress who exposes herself in public, so that it is only just that she should be punished. Paradoxically, what is regarded as reprehensible is not the invitation to licentiousness, but that the hope of possession

she seems to offer is false. The effect is to endorse the public (male) anger against her.

Clearly, the poster can be read in a variety of ways directly related not only to the information given or implied within its boundaries, but also to the knowledge, experience and desires of the viewer. Hélène Cixous puts forward the idea of the “visual grope” where eyes are likened to hands,<sup>5</sup> linking the visual with the physical. In the poem the “grobe” is facilitated by the illusion of life that is built into the representation by the use of colour, shape and perspective, encouraging the viewer to experience the terrain imaginatively. At the same time, the lack of detail leaves room for the viewer to build fantasies. In this way the poster’s function is similar to that of a relief map. Like a map depicting rainfall or a graph of progress, elements of time inherent in the daylight, the human body and the weather patterns also lend a dimension to the poster. While there is no actual movement, it is implied in the depiction of the sea, the sun, and the human, and is reinforced by the text which is designed to remind people that they may travel and partake of the riches they have been encouraged to imagine are constantly on offer because they are inherent in the landscape.

The poster works to create an illusion by combining different elements that the geographer, in an attempt to be scientific, accurate and analytical, normally attempts to represent separately. In trying to gain insight into any place, separate maps or charts would be considered together to give an ‘overall’ view that, as far as it goes, is proper and accurate. No amount of data can capture all the detail, however, and once combined in the human mind maps become subject to interpretation in just the

same way as a poster, painting or photograph. Because of this, cartography has come to be regarded as an implement of empire and oppression. Regardless of attempts to isolate empirical fact from value laden connections, the will to represent and define is linked to the will to possess,<sup>6</sup> and this poster provides a holiday-map where what is offered is free time: time-out from a life where the social and financial obligations of communal existence restrict behaviour.

In spite of being structured on a relatively specific aspect of the territory, it is not the role of the poster to include as much fact as possible about a single aspect (as, say, a rainfall map), but to make convincing an amalgam of information and disinformation that limits the messages presented to those that will promote sales. It is clear that the attitudes and juxtaposition of the individual components of the picture are designed to play on the desire to possess. The orientalising tendencies of the gazers are being freshened so that they may be led to make specific assumptions beyond the projection of their own currently held experience or knowledge, to the awakening or reawakening of their fantasies and desires. Of course art is as powerful as oratory, but this is not the usual meaning of the saying: "a picture is worth a thousand words". On the contrary, this saying implies that pictures have a higher degree of truth than speech: a facility for the presentation of dimensions that words cannot convey. But it seems odd that to represent three or more dimensions in two should be regarded as a fair and accurate practice, and even more odd that when more than three dimensions are used, as in drama, it is called 'acting,' and 'fantasy' and 'unreal.' The saying that "the camera does not lie" demonstrates quickly and easily that a two-dimensional representation of life's many dimensions

has traditionally been accorded more veracity in language than verbal or dramatic interpretations which describe or reproduce many of those dimensions, including the language itself.

Drama is only convincing when the actors give the impression that they have ‘been there’, and actors work hard to understand just what this might mean. But although travellers’ tales are enriched by actual experience, they often lack knowledge of the complexity, significance and relative value of what they see, such as Duffy depicts in “Saying Something” (*SFN* 18). Travellers may authoritatively misunderstand because they have seen. But seeing is selective: light rays are subject to the polarising effects of the seer’s own mind-set. Humans rely on language to round out the picture, and Duffy notes that language that is not understood can complicate seeing so that “Not to speak the language makes you / innocent again, invisible” (“Oslo”, *MT* 32). Larkin also talks about the freedom of the traveller that a language-difference gives. In “The Importance of Elsewhere” (*CP* 104) he feels the “welcome” of the “salt rebuff of speech, / [insisting] so on difference,” and this difference extends beyond speech, enabling him to redefine areas of his own social behaviour. The “Strangeness made sense” because it was mutual, and because it “was not home”. Both poets feel absolved from some of the normal social responsibilities that curb their behaviour at home, and this is partly because of the child-like perspective through which they view new sights, sounds and impressions. As in childhood, semiotic messages take on a greater degree of importance, and because these are open to interpretation without verbal clarification, they may assist the process of throwing off constraints.

Larkin took advantage of this social lee-way in Ireland, where he found life to be relatively free. He says: “in England” there are “my customs and establishments / It would be much more serious to refuse”, showing that in his adoption of a child-like freedom from responsibility that not understanding (and not being expected to understand) gives, he fails to note that he is probably committing social offences in Ireland. Because Larkin is being forgiven his ignorance in a way that open rebellion is not usually forgiven, he has no need to wonder whether it is fair to his hosts to continue to impose patterns of behaviour on them that they might not accept in themselves or each other. As temporary residents both poets enjoy freedom from the restraints that accompany the “customs and establishments” of the new place, and those they wish to reject that apply at home. Duffy notes that “if you like / you bribe the bellboy in this grand hotel / to tell where the casino is”, and go in under the “blue light” and “bet, bet and bet.”

Both poet-travellers participate in the subversion of their new-found innocence by taking advantage of the anonymity and the knowledge they already possess to do things that, perhaps, they might not do at home. For Duffy the constraints and the joys of being loved “hard enough / to sieve a single star from this dark sky” reach out “across the world,” sending her back to the hotel she temporarily calls “home” alone and “With only a numbered key”. Larkin, on the other hand, enjoys doing just as he likes, and getting away with it. Back in England he regrets that “Here no elsewhere underwrites [his] existence”, forcing him to make extra efforts and exposing any shortcomings.

The arm-chair tourist, who stays at home filling solitude with imaginings of foreign places can take even more liberties. In "Breadfruit" Larkin frames his poem with the dreams of boys, and the dreams of old men. It seems that at least twice in their life all males share a dream of sexual adventure with "native girls" who are prepared to feed them in return for tuition in sexual performance. Any real life experience they may have pales in comparison, and this might be ironic or outright funny, except that Larkin derides the real life relationships to a degree that shows that the dream is what he really wants. It is only the dream, he says, that "makes them join (the boys) the tennis club" and do all the things young men believe will ensure they are noticed by women. The relationships and lifestyles that develop are described as "uncorrected visions" that ultimately drive the men back to the original dream of their boyhood rather than to the realisation that their dreams were unrealistic.

In this poem Larkin has colonised not only the dream world, but the lives of men and women of his own culture. In both places women are completely outside the power structure except as sexual beings who entice men to sexual activity -- the "native" women with their availability, and the "real" women with unavailability. Available women are desirable because they are sexually uninhibited, and they do not ask (or deserve?) that the male take any responsibility for the relationship. But responsibility is what the women who marry expect as a pre-condition of availability. They use promises of sex to entrap men and extract promises of constancy, holding them to an earthly ransom that curtails the male's natural sexual, social and artistic freedom. Larkin's married women renege on their promises of

sexual availability, punishing and exploiting their husbands, sending them back into their dream.

Larkin has idealised and generalised, presenting the resulting construct as the *real* reality that supersedes other people's experience. Heterosexual relationships, he concludes, are a rat-race of commitment that he is separated from by his knowledge that it is the *dream* that is worthwhile. Rejection of marriage and the family is a logical outcome of this way of looking at life because these institutions of social organisation are underpinned by the social responsibility he wants to escape.

Larkin also escapes from the real world in "High Windows" (CP 165), where he describes the present as "paradise," and rejects it as in another time and place from his own. Here he uses his advancing years as an excuse to avoid joining in the increased sexual activity that he thinks is taking place, and to sidestep the relative freedom of the sixties. To take advantage of the new *mores* would mean making changes as well as "going down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly." The mere thought is enough to replace the words he hopes will make him immortal with "the thought of high windows" that reveal a vista that is "Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless." This boundless view suggests that provided Larkin can avoid the wordless pseudo-freedom of happiness, he will be really free to wander the universe and capture it all with his words.

Larkin has a significant body of poems that posit escape from social and emotional obligation. Some of these imply an idealised nomadic existence that is based on the idea of having complete freedom from social responsibility while

retaining the power to choose to embrace facets of human relationships and community life that are seen as desirable. This selfishness runs counter to any practical style of social or territorial organisation. It transgresses systems that are vital to social constructs of kinship and community, and also to political constructs such as state, nation and democratic rights. Nomadic wanderers need no territorial state and yet need access to all places. They need no formal political or legal system beyond the kind provided by tribal custom, and yet, when he comes into contact with others the lone wanderer needs the others to have a code of conduct that will keep them from harming him, and make their actions predictable. He can behave randomly if he chooses, but his stability is undermined if others do the same.

Larkin never actually becomes a wanderer except in the realm of contemplation where he can have all the advantages but none of the inconvenience. In “Poetry of Departures” (CP 85), he says that the knowledge that “I can, if he did” is enough to keep him “Sober and industrious.” He is not serious though, and there is also an acknowledgment that he knows he cannot “[*chuck*] up everything / And just [*clear*] off,” because he already has his “life, in perfect order”, and sees his “good books, the good bed” as a higher lifestyle. To become a nomad, then, would be a “deliberate step backwards” into a more primitive existence, and therefore more “artificial” than staying at home. While he imagines what it might be like to wander he is not restricted by the practical matters that must be addressed in order to live comfortably. The idea of “the nut-strewn roads” is more attractive if one also imagines fine weather; and the freedom of not having to adhere to a schedule or keep a job quickly tarnishes when it comes into contact with starvation or clashes



with rigid societal schedules. The whole idea of wandering as an alternative to a structured society is that the whim may rule at any time: that one may reject the rigidity of society's maps and charts, and the oppression of society's gaze. These are replaced by a bodily occupation that gives the illusion of mastery over great tracts of land and all they contain.

Larkin knows some of this: he posits a society that does not accept rejection lightly, for his wanderers die a social death that ensures the people speak about them only "As epitaph". The society they have rejected annihilates them by committing them to the past, where they exist only as an exciting piece of "fifth-hand" gossip which takes its authority from the mythical trappings of an oral history that has been passed down. This is something which the present generation only half believes in, and has not actually seen, and Larkin reminds the reader that to recite this piece of myth/history is also to tap into the world of fiction. Here the power and glory are under control, and the good hero can say "*Take that you bastard*", while offering violence that is socially sanctioned because it defends the moral values of the *status quo*. Like fiction, nomadism can represent the idea of an alternative society that is better or preferable to the one in which its audience lives because there is a sense of plot on which to base predictions and which can be manipulated to fulfil those predictions. The implications of rebellion through the adoption of a nomad-like existence are, therefore, not only extremely complex, but also extremely subversive.<sup>7</sup> When nomads become aligned with fiction and myth, however, much of the subversive potential for action is lost, and Larkin can safely say "I'd go today," because he can give a thousand reasons why he will not.

By first associating himself with the nomad, Larkin is able to represent himself as outside the system he derides. On the other hand, his rejection of the wandering, irresponsible life shows that he has superior knowledge and judgement to that of the wanderer. Because he first saw through his own society, then through the alternative, Larkin has shown he has the knowledge to represent others who accept these systems. This gives him what he needs to posit himself as a head of state, a Dalai Lama, safe in his impenetrable (because not understood) Shangri La with the knowledge of the universe safe in his treasury<sup>8</sup> where it can be protected from lesser mortals who will not understand it properly.

Larkin claims this superior kind of understanding even when escape is not an issue. He extends his jurisdiction to a knowledge of the seasons that is linked through its fertility to a knowledge of women. "Spring" (*CP* 39), he says, "Is earth's most multiple, excited daughter" and he, because he is "An indigestible sterility" to nature, is one of "those she has least use for" who "see her best." His wanderings of "paths grown craven and circuitous" have caused him to have "visions" that are "mountain clear" and free from vested interest because his "needs [are] modest." These visions are in direct contrast to the "uncorrected visions" of the men who seek to marry in "Breadfruit." Human emotion and mental balance are also among Larkin's specialist subjects, because he assures Kafka that "When [he's] had five years of it, not five months," as Larkin implies *he* has had, Kafka will "know about depression" ("The Literary World" I, *CP* 38). In "Born Yesterday" (*CP* 84) Larkin wishes the baby what "None of the others would: / Not the usual stuff" that he associates with luck, but that she "be ordinary; /... like

other women". Larkin's rejection of the "usual" as a gift implies that his judgement is superior. At the same time, however, the words "usual" and "ordinary" might be interchanged without substantially altering the meaning of the poem, and the gift itself is the very ordinariness he has surpassed or rejected in himself as giver. The road to an "enthralled / Catching of happiness" is through ordinariness, he says, and he should know because his extra-ordinariness has brought him misery. Larkin awards himself the authority of an archival superman with the ability to comprehend it all, and, unlike the languages of squashed flies and death, this language of authority translates very well into modern English.

Larkin's authority is extremely wide-ranging. Because he has all this knowledge, he not only relates what he sees, but makes comments that show he is comparing the lives and ideals of others to his own superior existence. He frequently places what he sees in the framework of a window, creating a bounded space, like a camera lens, through which to view others as static images. The result is that "The Whitsun Weddings" (*CP* 114), can be regarded as a natural history documentary, of which only the commentary survives, along the lines of 'working-class mating rituals performed on English railway-stations.' Like birds on a lake or primates in the trees these people need only be represented by any or every wedding party, because each is typical, and to an outsider they and their primitive rituals all look the same. Like a wild-life observer, Larkin records the customs of the outer-working-class, and charts these as the periphery of a space at which he represents the center or metropolis.

Here it is the women who must attract a mate. They are the colourful ones in “lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres” that they team with “heels and veils” to give an overall effect of “parodies of fashion.” This is in contrast with most of the rest of nature, where bright colours and display are the prerogative of the male. This “Marked off the girls unreally from the rest”, emphasising the unnatural perversity of the whole idea of human partnership. The depth of knowledge the young married couples stand to gain of each other, through love, is held as nothing and results only in ignorance of “others they would never meet”.

Larkin holds a superficial knowledge of everywhere and everyone as superior to the kind of intimate knowledge that, for instance, allows Duffy to engage in a “process of seeing” subtle changes, and the process of knowing, through loving, the space marked out by the clothing of her absent lover. Everyone/anyone is no-one in particular, and everywhere/anywhere is nowhere in particular. Such generalisation implies that the perfect knowledge is available through the rejection of the particular, and over-rules the concrete experience of local knowledge. This can be useful in a deliberate rejection or loss of an unsatisfactory past that does not reinforce a desired present. In “I Remember, I Remember” (CP 81), Larkin retrospectively robs his childhood of place and time, and himself of experience and roots by just this means. The one positive connection he acknowledges with Coventry is that it was the place from which “we annually departed / For all those family hols”. Coventry, then, was a place to start out from, a place to leave at regular intervals in order to pursue the business of what really happened in childhood in some other place. It is no wonder, then, that memories of what really

happened in Coventry are overshadowed by unfulfilled hopes and fantasies; the negative reality of a “childhood [that] was unspent”. By the end of the poem this childhood thus becomes a “Nothing” and Coventry an “anywhere,” both sliding into elusiveness and anonymity.

Larkin has rejected Coventry because although he “squinnied for a sign” he could recognise, he “wasn’t even clear / Which side was which”: the external features he relied on to orient himself have changed. In spite of clear signposting, he does not acknowledge the territory as the same now that it appears to be different. This resistance to change can be explained in terms of what J. Hillis Miller, in the introduction to *Topographies*, describes as “the power of the conventions of mapping and of the projections of place names on the place.”<sup>9</sup> These, he says, are “so great that we see a landscape as though it were already a map, complete with place names and the names of geographical features,” and because of this the “place names seem to be intrinsic to the place.” If this is so, a change in the appearance of the place could amount to a change in the place itself sufficient to weaken its claim to the name. In this sense, then, the Coventry Larkin saw through the train window was not the place where he grew up, and he re-maps the area, relating what he sees in terms of his memories. In the fourth stanza he says: “By now I’ve got the whole place clearly charted”, but because this recharting relies more heavily on the past than on the present it serves not to update his idea of the modern city he views, but to accentuate his dislocation.

Coventry was changed by the war, and perhaps it was not as Larkin remembered it, if he did indeed remember it in a way that proves reliable over the

years. The war destroyed much of Coventry, and Larkin must have been moved by the nearness of his childhood to actual annihilation. At least in reflection of maturity, if not at the time, he must have thought that if he had been a few years younger, or if his parents had been more neighbourly, some or all of them might have been killed in the bombing. But instead of Coventry signifying the place where his home was left standing and his parents alive despite the destruction of part of the same street, it is removed from the map of real experience and earmarked for deposit in the 'poor me' account. Larkin has fed his self-absorption on the dichotomy of the nomadic sands that are too vast for human comprehension, but expects that they are also typified by any and every grain of sand, that, when examined closely, reveals the secrets of the desert. He has known the place of Coventry intimately, but fails to realise that it is not now 'his' place at all, but a location where that remembered place once was. He does not attribute gaps in his knowledge of the new place to his failure to update his knowledge, or to the systems with which that old knowledge is manipulated, but to the place and time of the event that is not understood. The failure of the place to conserve what was known results in the loss of veracity of his experiences in that known place.

In thinking this way, Larkin is in step with his times, at least with the times of his youth. After the Second World War changes emerged or were consolidated in systems of thought. Foucault regards this time as the end of "the Victorian system of knowledges", where "imperialism (the army/the colonies)" was replaced by systems "closer to a fascist model (police, internal surveillance, confinement)".<sup>10</sup> This is in line with the idea that loss of empire resulted in loss of a clearly delineated

outside boundary.<sup>11</sup> But although Larkin looked inward for answers, he had grown up in an empire where space meant territory, and territory could be controlled by information, and he shows no sign of giving up on the idea that the perfect answers were out there somewhere. As time went by, and the idea of empire became less viable, this must have taken more and more effort. His dismissal of Coventry in terms of being the place where nothing happened, however, shows he sought to associate himself with place in a way that made it his, yet allowed him to treat it dismissively, as if the connection were accidental.<sup>12</sup> He treats Hull this way, too, and in “The Whitsun Weddings” he anticipates arriving in London by visualising the London area as “postal districts packed like squares of wheat” that can be stored stacked, or “spread out in the sun”, as these are, according to his need.

Duffy sees windows rather differently. In “First Love” (*MT* 27) the garden outside is “shaking with light” and the windows in her mind are like “old film played at a slow speed” showing pictures of “changing sky”. This view is not possessed as much as experienced as part of the recollection of personal loss. It is “love” that “stand[s] by a window” again in “Crush” (*MT* 29), and again the view does not dominate, but the viewer is “anointed with sudden light” from outside. In “The Windows” (*MT* 47), Duffy does give a description of a life in a home, but not as something to be critiqued, and she asks “How do you learn it?” There is no need to take over this territory, because a formula is available for the creation of a home of your own. Often the one who looks out is not the poet herself; and the reader has the overwhelming feeling that she is not the one enclosed either by the window or by the view.

Duffy shows that those who, like Larkin, look with an appropriating gaze are dysfunctional. In “Dear Norman” (*SFN* 41), the speaker “turn[s] the newspaper boy into a diver / for pearls” simply because s/he “can”. Even after the real boy who inspired the fantasy is gone, the imaginary one can be renamed and controlled through language:

I trace his name upon the window-pane.  
There is little to communicate, but I have re-arranged  
the order of the words. Pablo says You want for me  
to dive again? I want for you to dive.

Tomorrow I shall deal with the dustman.

Such wanton appropriation of other people indicates not serious colonisation, but a mad fantasy that is clearly recognisable. The gaze also fails in “Space , Space” (*SM* 53), where the window is so distorting that the “Astronomer” who is “In love with space” looks at “absences, / gone worlds”. Through his telescope he “perceives / new galaxies where nowhere is.” Here the viewer is sane and scientific; but knowing that “That star went out more years ago / than we can count” is no deterrent to the will to gaze, discover, and map. The product is given veracity in the present, although it is a fantasy of the past.

Rather than spaces to look through, Duffy’s windows are sometimes gaps through which light and shadows travel to illuminate the viewer’s immediate vicinity. The model in “Standing Female Nude” is illuminated for the artist by the “window light”; and in “Practicing Being Dead” (*SM* 9),

Your own ghost, you stand in dark rain  
and light aches out from the windows  
to lie in pools at your feet.



Even here the light forms ethereal “pools” that suggest water: puddles that cannot be captured, but only transformed and reconstituted by the drying rays of the sun.

Duffy, like Larkin, is unable to account fully for time, so that the way she treats distance, and through distance, location, seems similar in important ways to Larkin’s treatment. But Larkin takes possession of a much greater area when he moves into the life-space of others, because he insists on taking his own and superimposing it on all he sees. He appropriates time as well as space and distance when he fantasises about sex, or about opting out of his social responsibilities by playing the nomad. This is not a mediating process but a kind of viewing through one way glass that protects the seer’s privacy by denying the object of the gaze the facility to negotiate.

Duffy differs from Larkin in that her poetry does not always appropriate the illusion of the concrete that space permits. Her two-dimensional representations of space are not presented as offering possession, but give a link to a memory and/or to an opportunity for sharing, through the memories of others, a time and place that is gone. Because Duffy seeks to rule only her own territory, and traverse the territory of others by the diplomatic negotiation of a space for herself as observer/archivist, she strives to represent space as linked to the experiencer of that space, and to the language that relates and mediates this experience in the wider environment.

Larkin agrees that words are important, but he wants his verbal representations to have a life of their own that usurps any other authority. He gathers data and charts in the pseudo-scientific way that imperial explorers did, and justifies intrusion as the quest for knowledge, and as a gift of a higher conception of art and

civilisation. He writes his own histories, geographies and archives to support his position, and from this draws authority to dictate terms of existence in his poems. Although Larkin is anti-travel, and anti-classical myth kitty, like the English monarchs he constructs an empire for himself without either having to defer to past empires, or having to leave England. But appropriation of actual territory is sometimes accomplished with violence, and an empire under threat will almost always use violence to retain its colonies: war, however, is problematic to the imperialism of writing. Textual appropriation is one thing, but war is a tool of political and economic rather than textual empire, and not something writers, as a rule, wish to engage in.

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<sup>1</sup> Winifred Dawson (nee Arnott) remembers the occasion, but says that she did not realise at the time that her photographs had made such an impression on Larkin. (Mentioned in conversation at "The New Larkins for Old" conference, Hull, June 1997)

<sup>2</sup> This speaker behaves in the aggressive, destructive way that is associated with a kind of machismo exhibited by some male personae in Duffy's poetry, so I will refer to this person as 'he' although his/her gender is not clearly stated.

<sup>3</sup> Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferris, "Introduction" to *On Fashion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994. S. Benstock and Ferris eds) 8.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said describes this process and coins the term 'orientalism' in his book *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), and refines his ideas in later works such as *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Hélène Cixous, quoted in *On Fashion* (Benstock and Ferris), 4.

<sup>6</sup> In his first chapter Richards gives an interesting account of the determination of the British to map Tibet, even though the Tibetans had closed their borders, and forbidden access.

<sup>7</sup> John Joseph Saunders, "The Nomad as Empire Builder of the Arab and Mongol Conquests", Offprint, *Diogenes* 52. Nomad invaders have a reputation for ferocity, and although some have been civilised and many repelled, they have, on occasion, "overturned an organised state.... [and] Two created world empires as a result of conquests" (79).

<sup>8</sup> Richards writes of the imperial archive in such terms (19-21, 31-32).

<sup>9</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>10</sup> M. Foucault, (interview, 1977) quoted in Richards, note 3, 168.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24-25. See also next note.

<sup>12</sup> Smith cites Enoch Powell as an example of a politician who dealt with de-colonisation and loss of empire by asserting that "the colonies and the imperial periphery were absolutely irrelevant to the British people." Smith continues: "He therefore plays both sides of decolonisation at once. He speaks as if the British identity had remained absolutely intact throughout all the external accidents of imperial and post-colonial history. He acts, however, in quite a different manner. He acts as if

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Britain were indeed caught in the grips of an identity crisis, as if decolonization had in fact involved the catastrophic loss of a constitutive outside” (24-25). Smith further discusses Powell’s view of the empire as accidental on 70-74; 130-40.

## Chapter 6

### War and Peace (or a Nation at War): Fighting the Good Fight

Fear not ye covered hills and plains,  
 England shall remove your chains,  
 And we shall all live happily  
 If someone will set England free.<sup>1</sup>

Appropriation of territory by force is the logical outcome of an appropriating gaze that is underwritten by religious belief. Philip Larkin did live through an horrific war that threatened his places and his cultural capital, and a generation later Carol Ann Duffy inherited the effects and the lore of that same war. Although the issues pertaining to the war were by no means clear-cut, in the interests of national security it was not permitted to question the motives or actions of those in authority. Like the books in Carol Ann Duffy's "Model Village" library, the citizen is presented with the choice of accepting the official view and not acknowledging competing moral questions, or, by dismissing the prohibition to question, thinking the unspeakable. But books can contain their dilemma within well documented plots: for Larkin, there is a continuing dilemma because he cannot invoke such prescriptive measures, yet his urge to preserve prevents him from examining and jettisoning contradictory and damaging elements. Duffy, however, has experienced war only as something that happens to others, and as a topic that is discussed openly. Her study of philosophy may also have led her to question the power structures and the relativity of competing ethical and cultural issues surrounding war in ways that

Larkin was unable to do. It seems reasonable to expect, then, that these poets would represent war quite differently: that Larkin would emulate pre-World War II British imperialism, whereas Duffy might seem to be displaying a more modern kind of imperialistic paradigm where attempts are made to take competing values into account.

But Britain's involvement in war must be problematic for both writers. Motivations for the start of World War II indicate that Britain's desire to control extended beyond the gaining of territory to the enforcement, beyond their own borders, of moral values that were regarded not as qualitative value judgements embedded in a specific culture, but as quantitative measures of absolute value. To the British, this war was at least as much about the enforcement of moral judgements as about the occupation of actual territory. In the face of this, British writers may well have had difficulty positioning themselves in relation to their national and cultural identity, for in emulating their nation they may seem to endorse wholesale slaughter and a double standard. Opposing the national stance, however, also invites a questioning of the individual's loyalty and rights to group membership.

Moderate views are out of place in war, and war is not something that can be ignored: it must have been impossible to live in Britain during the bombing, as Philip Larkin did, and not actually 'experience' war. Although he seldom publicly acknowledged the war or its effects on his life or his works, his pro-English and anti-foreign stance, which is typified in his abhorrence of 'abroad', *is* in line with the imperialist discourse of British superiority. This would lead a reader to expect that any 'war poetry' he might write would be racist and highly jingoistic: even if he were to echo the ideas voiced by his father, that Britain could not win against the

more efficient Germany, it is likely that this would amount to criticism of the youth and/or the government of the day, rather than an admission of actual cultural, moral or intellectual inferiority. Larkin depicts his father, in a cartoon, uttering just such a speech; the messages about war, about Britain, and about Larkin's own value, are curiously mixed.<sup>2</sup>

That Larkin did use a wartime setting in one of his novels, *Jill*, and that this is fictionalised and problematised only as fiction, demonstrates his wish to distance himself from both direct support for, and censure of, the war. But that he wrote no war poetry is something that, until recently, readers have taken for granted. The evidence for this assumption rests mainly on the lack of published work relating to the home-front, and Larkin's own assertion that he wrote none, expressed either directly or indirectly (for example, in his criticism of other writers who did so). That he was believed for so long demonstrates the calibre of the credibility he gained from seeming to represent the 'average' Briton. It seems incredible, however, that, as one dedicated to preserving the past almost as it occurs, he should consider such a monumental event as a world war suitable only for a background to fiction, and even more incredible that the biographical nature of the home-front in *Jill* was not detected and exposed by his critics.

That Larkin's unpublished 'war' poetry does exist has been the topic of some recent comment, and that it is not as artistically satisfying as his published poetry can be no surprise. Technically, many of the poems are out of sync with their content. "Leave",<sup>3</sup> for example, begins as if it were a ballad, perhaps setting the scene for the soldier's tale of adventure or hardship, but the soldier is never given a voice and the poem quickly degenerates into criticism not of the war machine, but of

family life. Frequently, the form of these early poems is constrained by the quatrain and by rhyme: some begin in a serious vein, but fall into light, unsuitable rhythms, and others begin in light vein and become serious. This in no way negates the value of the content, however, and these early poems are useful, not only in furthering an understanding of the poet, but also in framing an understanding of the published works. While the nature of some of the logical conclusions of the complex (and sometimes forbidden) issues would make an artistically satisfying rewriting difficult, and perhaps, impossible, this lack of polish could mean that these poems are characterised by a spontaneity, and are felt by their creator in a personal way that his more detached, published work that aspires to be Art, is not. The unpublished 'war' poems do have a uniformity of attitude that suggests they are sincere. They express feelings which were not easily expressed, but which were too strong to be suppressed: most slide into a cynical awareness, and a show of distaste, for the killings and deceptions of war.

Larkin and Duffy provide an interesting parallel. Duffy has also written, quite early in life, about war. She, too, has rejected this early work (which was published while she was still at school) perhaps more from a consciousness that it is juvenilia than from a change of heart. Like those of Larkin, these early poems owe as much to youthful vigour and candour as to the canon, but unlike him, she has backed this poetry, or, perhaps, replaced it, with other poems that deal with similar subject matter. Naturally, these later poems are more sophisticated and highly polished artifacts, but they also show a continued struggle to understand the conflicting ethical and practical issues that are foreshadowed in the earlier poetry.

That each poet has written and, in some way, rejected a body of 'war' poetry is significant, but Larkin's rejection of not only the poems, but their material, demonstrates the extent of his avoidance. Attacking other writers who took a stand is part of his strategy. In his article on the poetry of Wilfred Owen, he makes it clear that he sees having lived through "the squalid accident of war"<sup>4</sup> as one of the "temporal accidents"<sup>5</sup> that a poet should rise above. He criticises Owen's depiction of war experience, implying that his work is spoiled by personal involvement. That Larkin regards this closeness as a disadvantage that even the great could not overcome, is evident in his assertion that "'The Wreck of the Deutschland', we feel, would have been markedly inferior if Hopkins had been a survivor from the passenger list".<sup>6</sup> This has an imperialistic ring, for Larkin's rejection of *specific* war experience as material for poetry while approving of war-time generalities amounts to an insistence on text as control at a distance, and is an attempt at justification for the colonising of experience in general. Conversely, it shows an unwillingness to utilise textual art as a means to explore personal experience in order to learn from that experience.

According to Larkin's stated attitude (which seems little short of amazing), Duffy's portrayal of wartime conditions should be more satisfying than Larkin's own, but she is unable to entertain many of the paradigms that he regarded as basic to British identity, making it unlikely that her work would gain his approval. Because she was not born until after the Second World War, Duffy might be expected to have internalised many of the post-war changes that kept Larkin on the defensive throughout his life. By the time Duffy was old enough to notice, he would already have seemed old-fashioned, and by the time she began to publish there was a



substantial body of support for anti-war ideas. As a postwar child Duffy would have grown up hearing a discourse about the war that, at times, was expressed in jingoistic terms, but it is also likely that this discourse would have been tempered by an opposing discourse centred on the idea that so much killing and hardship outweighed the advantages. The adult attitudes she expresses in her poetry are, indeed, at great variance with postwar nationalist and racist justifications of the Second World War. Furthermore, the wars she comments on are, in the main, not the ‘Great’ wars of the past where British people at home felt the effects of attack by enemy planes, or of rationing and general unavailability of goods,<sup>7</sup> but those contemporary to her own life (such as the war in Vietnam, the Falklands, or the Middle East), which, like the earlier wars of imperial expansionism, are/were fought in far-off places.<sup>8</sup>

Even when she does write about war Duffy refrains from participating in the “waves of imperial nostalgia” that recent wars have engendered:<sup>9</sup> it is the people in the war arena, the military and civilian victims, whose plight is presented. In “Poker in the Falklands with Henry & Jim” (*SFN* 54), where the men gamble, opposing each other with cards while their nation gambles with their lives, the uncertainty they feel about their future serves to undercut both their status as soldiers and their normal lives, making them victims even as, from a position of relative strength, they attack and destroy. In “Alliance” (*SFN* 26), the anti-French racism that has been fed by numerous wars throughout the centuries is revealed as a personal pettiness that, rather than serving a nationally useful function, serves merely as a strategy to uphold systems of domination in day-to-day life. Thus Duffy spends no time depicting national glory, and, although, like Larkin, she does not

attempt to justify or explain war, unlike Larkin, she does attempt to present the experiences she relates as belonging to, and as part of, the experiencer. There is, at first glance, a certain irony in this comparison, which must surely be founded on Larkin's refusal to own publicly the pain of war that is rightfully his.

It is curious that Larkin's failure to place before the public a substantial body of poetry about the home-front was so readily accepted: that he has been permitted to simply draw a line between *war* poets (who, he says are "chained ... to a historical event, and an abnormal one at that"),<sup>10</sup> and *other* poets, and place himself in the second category despite the "temporal accidents"<sup>11</sup> of his own experiences. This is an artificial construction that breaks down under examination, for his published poetry does contain both references to war and a display of imperialistic attitudes. In addition, the archives contain poems that grow out of his wartime attitudes and his perception of the experience of the people around him. These, although they remain unpublished and, for the most part, unpolished, might be regarded as war poetry from the home-front, and they do reveal Larkin's insight into the human price of war that is not immediately evident in the later, more public poetry.

Larkin is well known for his 'Englishness' which, while it is often localised, implies an imperialist, nationalistic component; and one of the ways he asserts his British identity is through racism. In his biography of Larkin, Andrew Motion describes several instances of racism (pertaining to black jazz musicians),<sup>12</sup> and racism is implicit in "Breadfruit" (*CP* 141), where women of the Pacific are eager to have sex with (and support economically) white men. But there is also specifically anti-Semitic material in an unpublished poem, "My Home"<sup>13</sup> (quoted here in its

entirety), where he traces the post-war decline of England, and includes Jewish affluence as part of that decline:

Uninteresting land it must have been,  
 A city field —  
 Coarse bunches of unbitten grass.  
 But it was green,  
 And now all is concealed

By lumpy avenues  
 By clay-filled scars  
 Soft creosoted wood, vases, veneers,  
 Red and black gates (in front of which Jews  
 Polish their post-war cars)...[sic]

That these Jews “Polish” rather than drive or admire their cars, and the placement of the word so that it is capitalised, reinforce the pun, suggesting that some of the Jews may be doubly foreign -- Polish, perhaps. At a time of British austerity, Jews are affluent, just as jazz musicians are black, Pacific Island women are obsessed with sex, and their white counterparts out to consume the energy of white men. Poles, Jews, blacks, the affluent and women, then, are all outsiders. Thus Larkin is able to posit small insider groupings on criteria that exclude most people, but especially those who are unlike himself.

In his criticism of other nations Larkin also relies heavily on the kind of us/them divisions that uphold nationalistic zeal. For instance, in a letter to Kingsley Amis (January, 1943), he comments on a report from America that clothing belonging to a stripper -- in this case a wedding dress -- is to be auctioned to raise funds for the war. He is aware that the English are in no position to refuse help on moral or artistic grounds, or even to throw stones, but vents his anger nonetheless, saying that England

may be full of dishonesty and unpleasantness and sordidity etc but I (naturally I suppose) have a peculiar prejudice in favour of it. Fuck America. God fuck America.<sup>14</sup>

In this statement, Larkin portrays the American war effort as frivolous and vulgar: a strip act that parodies the (this time conveniently) sacred institution of marriage, and he curses America as a pseudo “bride” who is spiritually and sexually corrupt. In accordance with this sentiment, he expresses no thanks and accords no authority to American assistance or difference, while simultaneously excusing himself from the need to examine any faults of home that he is obliged to acknowledge by attributing his fondness to nature.

Larkin’s attitude to outsiders is consistently negative, but his wartime attitudes to home are strongly ambivalent. The distressing incident he fictionalises in *Jill* (a trip to Coventry, after the bombing, to establish the fate of home and relatives) is treated in a way that gives no hint of its connection to Larkin’s own life, and until the publication of the biography by Andrew Motion in 1993, most readers were aware only of the fiction. This is an experience of war and of home that he chooses to downplay, or disown, a method of negating his own experience that is in line with his treatment of Coventry in “I Remember, I Remember” (*CP* 81), where he avoids identifying himself with changes, some of which must have been due to rebuilding and repair of war-damage.<sup>15</sup> The place he remembers as Coventry is gone: in its location is a different place,<sup>16</sup> and its strange newness obliterates both his childhood experiences and his duty to be grateful for them. This indicates both a detachment from, and a real reliance on, the old, known place, and he dubs the new Coventry “anywhere”, which is akin to ‘nowhere’, confirming its irrelevance for him. Larkin prefers to annihilate his own childhood rather than to acknowledge his need to

mourn the loss and face the accompanying need to examine his attitudes. Instead, he preserves his ambivalences towards the war and towards his identification with a war-like nation/state, without giving his direct support to actions taken on his behalf by that nation/state.

Because Britain has an elected government, people at the home-front are implicated in the government decision to go to war. Continuing support for the fight is implicit in the failure to examine propaganda and the sanctioning of the prioritising of the international enforcement of a principle over the lives of individual British citizens. But this responsibility is diminished by the lack of personal power to oppose the governing bodies and the military. Larkin notes, in a poem that has not been published, entitled “The Conscientious Objector” (which appears in a manuscript entitled “Further Poems”, subtitled “Nine Poems of Depression and Dismay” and dated June 1940),<sup>17</sup> that refusing to fight would leave an able-bodied male in an untenable position. His rejection of the option, however, is unconnected to any requirement of the period that the objection be on religious grounds, or to any belief regarding the justice or morality of war; this poem gives a bleak picture of the social position of the registered conscientious objector. Not only were his “old loves sickened”, but a new one “grew faint”. This rejection at the personal level is reinforced by the cosmos: he is also rejected by “The stars that were so friendly”, which, having deserted him as he has deserted his nation, “now revolve / Without commenting on him”. The objector is excommunicated from society, so that the best he can hope for is “Disgrace.... [and] safety - of a sort.” While the objector may have physical (and perhaps religious) safety, it is not a

position of cultural or social safety, and finally “He falls amid cold logic’s stalactites”, disowned, uncomfortable and uncomforted.<sup>18</sup>

To denounce the war effort, then, is not a socially acceptable option, but in “Conscript” (*CP* 262), which also appears in “Further Poems”, it is the home-as-castle that is violated (by the nation) when someone who speaks “in a different dialect” insists the citizen join the army. This authoritarian person must be British, yet he is an outsider, and his assertion that the new recruit “was to blame” for the war makes him seem ridiculous, reducing the “defeat and murder” mentioned at the end of the poem to a personal level. The loss of individual rights lamented, then, is not a self-deprivation made for the good of the group, but dues demanded by one of ‘them’: a bully with a “different dialect” who is both a countryman, and an outsider. This positing of a divided inside gives a sense of civil war or of anarchy -- the sense that the strong, or those in authority, are forcing this war on the innocent and the reluctant -- so that it is the self and not allegiance to the nation/state that is the primary obligation. Furthermore, it is the mis-behaviour of those with power that has caused the trouble, so that the tables of obligation are turned and it is the soldier who is owed a debt that the nation/state is reluctant to pay. That other ordinary people collude narrows the possible pool of community identification open to the reluctant soldier (Larkin himself?).

The poems “The Conscientious Objector” and “Conscript” (which was published during his lifetime), appear together on one page of Larkin’s manuscripts, and he has written “Tripey” in such a manner that it is not certain whether he refers to one or to both poems. Nevertheless, these provide a gloss of Larkin’s remarks in

his recollections of his class going to sign up, during his second year at Oxford, for service the following term:

Nobody could have been expected to understand that without being a conscientious objector I did not want to join the army on moral grounds. However, I was fundamentally - like the rest of my friends - uninterested in the war, and a term seemed a long time.<sup>19</sup>

Larkin does not note that because religious grounds are the only ones accepted by officialdom, moral objections of atheists are nullified; furthermore, those who espouse mainstream religious views, including Catholicism, are restricted to the official (protestant?) definition of morality. Those who can prove longstanding allegiance to specifically pacifist sects or denominations are given exemption, not because of their moral objections or the moral authority accorded their religion, but because they are already marked as outsiders whose loyalty is not reliable. Long before the university term was up, however, Larkin had been notified that he had been rejected because of his short-sightedness, and this aspect of his personal dilemma was ended.

Larkin was greatly relieved to be spared enlistment, but there is a very real sense in which being turned down for the forces contains an element of criticism at one's failure to 'measure up' or to be free from defects. Even now, when people recall the war, or marvel at the horror of the loss of life, it is often in terms of 'our best young men' that the loss is articulated. Larkin's attitudes towards Britain, then, must have been at least a little ambivalent: he does not want to go to war, but it is he who has been rejected as 'unfit'. The conflicting attitudes expressed in "Conscript" and in "The Conscientious Objector" and the ambivalence of "I Remember, I Remember" combine to show that, in this instance, Larkin achieves a degree of

unity by insisting that his memories relate not to location, but to place. Because his place, pre-war Coventry, is now gone, he can perceive his allegiance to home as intact, while snubbing the country that is responsible for much of the change that makes post-war Coventry foreign to him. This wanton destruction of the past through the act of war, may be seen as a cultural transgression that weakens the nation's authority to judge that Larkin was not 'one of our best' by rejecting his help in winning the war. Thus, any attempt at unequivocal nationalistic zeal would involve Larkin in an implied conflict with feelings of self-worth, and this insoluble dichotomy suggests a possible explanation for the disowning-through-fictionalising of his search for his parents after the bombing.

Nevertheless, through the bombing of Coventry, the fighting becomes personal, and sometimes, even from his position of relative safety, Larkin sees only annihilation ahead. In an unpublished poem, "Chant", <sup>20</sup> he lists some alarming observations:

A trainload of tanks is leaving the town  
 A ship outside the harbour is going down  
 The sky's full of aeroplanes overhead  
 And the streets are full of soldiers that are going to be dead.

The soldiers in the streets, and the sailors (who may be already dying just "outside" the safety of "the harbour"), bring the wholesale slaughter of the war arena close, destabilising any feeling of personal safety, or any efforts to distance the self from the grimness of war. This can be elided, however, because although Larkin writes of "Air Marshal Death" later in the same poem, and although he presents the home-front as under threat, it remains untouched. This is in spite of the fact that "in the first three years of the war, more civilians were killed than soldiers", <sup>21</sup> and although



his poem is undated, the bombing of Coventry in 1940 may have already occurred, making even more odd the implication that Britain itself is unscarred .

Duffy, who was not there, does write about a survivor of the bombing in “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” (*SFN* 50), which is “after the drawing by Henry Moore”, telling of homelessness and battle fatigue on the home-front. The woman has “no memory” of who she is or where she comes from, but only knows “[she] is pregnant” and that she has “no wedding ring, no handbag, nothing.” She remembers the social conventions that she may be contravening, but her own past has been obliterated by the blast. She recalls

a bang and then  
I was running with the rest through smoke. Thick, grey  
smoke has covered thirty years at least.

Although she has lost as much of her life as many of the soldiers killed prematurely in battle, it is loss of a future that is commemorated with medals and cenotaphs: loss of a past does not rate any kind of acknowledgment (as Larkin has demonstrated). The woman, doubly bereft, is surrounded by confusion which blends with her own, and can only think to “scream until / somebody helps [her].” The poem ends with another reference to war that ties the woman firmly to its consequences, and implies that help may not be forthcoming because “The skies were filled with sirens, planes, / fire, bombs, and I lost myself in the crowd. Dear God.” Other people are too frightened and too busy to help anyone whose injuries are not immediately obvious. Here, then, is a poem about a people at war, such as Larkin might have written (but apparently did not) from a writer who was not even born at that time. The “temporal accident” of Duffy’s life is that she did not experience war directly, and according to Larkin’s reasoning, this has made her more qualified to write about it.

Although Larkin considered he was disadvantaged by his first-hand experience, he does comment on the carnage and the disruption to ordinary daily life. In “Conscript” and in “The Conscientious Objector” it was the individual who was betrayed by the nation; but in “Chant”, Larkin also notes that the daily life of kinship groups is betrayed when parents, who in peace times are the custodians of the continuation of their race, are manufacturing munitions. Instead of nurturing and creating life they participate in the war effort that splits families: families have become less important than destroying the enemy:

Down to the factory go dad and mother  
 They go in one door, shells come out the other,  
 A letter told my sister she'd got to leave home  
 With a ticket for a very distant aerodrome.

A ticket and a letter is all it takes to send someone from the warmth of their family to the unknown. Gone is the security and predictability that having a home and belonging to a family group had formerly offered. If family groups are to be ignored or deliberately broken up, not only will the home lose its status as the average citizen's castle, but the family will also lose stability as a unit of community. If the community loses stability, eventually the nation must do so too. This cannot be allowed to happen if a concerted war effort is to continue.

Reuniting the members of a family who have been separated and subject to differing degrees of trauma, however, is not a simple matter. In “Leave”<sup>22</sup> Larkin describes the family preparations for the homecoming of a soldier and consequent family social events. He also describes the soldier's difficulty in coping with the barrage of questions, and the implied question as to whether he had distinguished himself. This poem captures many of the elements surrounding problems of the reintegration of families following the forced separation of their members. The

returning soldier is especially disorientated and unable to slip back into his former family position. This disorientation trips Larkin, and he portrays the reunion not as one of failed good-will or potential for rejoicing, but as consistent with his own jaundiced view of family life. Even the imagery of the food has military overtones, with “Three kings of blancmange” who, although soft and sweet in themselves, have their troops and munitions at the ready in the form of more substantial foods:

The barrel by the radiogram  
Held seven gallons  
As a balance  
To the seven pound ham...

The use of weights and measures as adjectives reminds the reader of the military custom of differentiating between various types of weapons by the weight or capacity of their ammunition. This imagery is reinforced by the reference to a “barrel”, which implies not only alcohol for the troops, but also a gun. Furthermore, in times of war a juxtaposition of “barrel” and “radiogram” surely suggests both military music and food that is lethal, or, more directly, a battle zone where gunfire and communications combine against an enemy (in this case, a young man’s own family) and pre-recorded propaganda.

This family, like the nation, is feeding on conflict so that their home is a war zone more frightening than an actual battlefield. The returning soldier would rather stay at (the real) war than face the fussing of his family. He is unable to talk in a meaningful way to any of them, and in the last lines of the poem, when the party is over, “He heard the doom / Of ‘Alone at last, dear.’” The worst threat, then, is not the German bullet, not the cold and disease of the trenches, nor even the extended family circle, but the wife. For Larkin, fighting a war (or, more exactly, *not* fighting *in* one) has become conflated with avoiding commitment, and he is able to

deny the influence of the war on his life by transferring his fears onto another area of fear he has already acknowledged. Symbolically, he is a returned soldier because his rejection of marriage gives him back the right and power to fight for his own freedom. As a soldier wounded by loneliness, alienated from his family by absence, warped by terror, and failed by a community that promised glory but has not delivered (either in the military or the literary sense), he ensures that he is entitled to be dysfunctional. A continued denial of literary success in the face of the facts allows him to maintain the delusion.

But Duffy agrees that war causes social dysfunction and changes people. In “Army”,<sup>23</sup> an early poem, although she is probably thinking of the Vietnam war and the horrors of war in general, she writes of a returning soldier who cannot negotiate family relationships. Duffy projects her knowledge and fear of war into the future, presenting an horrific image of a wounded soldier who has lost not his ability to love, but his lovability. This young man, damaged by war *and* by rehabilitation, tentatively and hesitantly seeks to supplement his identity through the recognition and approval of his parents:

Hello mother!  
It's your eldest son back from the nuclear war,  
well, half of me anyway.

Unlike Larkin's returning soldier he wants to resume his place in the family, but is initially unable to do so because the family, far from providing a welcome, does not even know him. He mentions several permanent injuries that have changed his appearance -- “one eye”, a “wooden leg”, and “wind me up at the back with a key” -- seeking to persuade his mother that he is both “real” and “plastic” -- that he is a “private” rather than a public entity, and that he is her child. But his “private”

function has been in the public arena. Now, in spite of the prostheses that enables his movement, he is “shorter” rather than taller. The implication is that although he was conscripted at an age when he was still growing, his potential has been rendered a negative, or loss.

Nevertheless, a tenuous recognition is established, and the soldier, part human, part robotics, attempts to evoke a shared male discourse of the heroic -- “wouldn’t father be proud of me!” -- and immediately reinforces this by drawing attention to his decorations: “See the medals mother, / they hold my chest up”. This soldier is so extensively damaged that his chest cannot support the medals, and so they must support him as a doer of war deeds (like his dead father?), the only identity left to him. Later in the poem he says: “Mother, I’m so glad to hear that you’re / pleased with me. / I shot a General, you know”, conflating his identity with a recitation of his deeds.

The members of this family are not at war with each other, but, like the family in Larkin’s “Leave”, they are unable to support each other because the war has destroyed the mutuality that underpinned their inter-personal relationships and ways of relating. The soldier is now half-robot, built to obey military orders rather than to exert his autonomy; and the mother will need time to adjust to the idea that this man/killer/machine is also her son. The poem ends with one last allusion to the loss of quality of life suffered by the soldier, and the estrangement it has caused, when he says that he cannot shake hands with his mother, because he is “not going to dig it [his hand] up just for that”. He reiterates the assertion, showing both that his mother does not seek to hug him, or demonstrate affection in a family way, and also that he has internalised the strictures of war that dictate priorities, placing family time and

contact lower on the scale than that spent on the battlefield. The reader is left to ponder the mother's estrangement, and wonder how she can begin to relate to a "plastic private" who has lost many of the attributes associated with humanity. Not only is he bodily changed, but like many who suffer trauma, he "cannot cry".

In this poem Duffy uses military terms to draw parallels between war and power relations in peacetime society, and she links war planning to war games when the returning soldier, who (like a real toy soldier) is metal and plastic, says: "I'm not a child any shorter, mother, / I'm a big toy now". This twisting of language reinforces the soldier's loss of his childhood, and reminds the reader that although he does not play with toys, he and his weapons *are* toys in the hands of the Generals and Field Marshals. Furthermore, these military authorities may well plan their strategies at a mock-up that resembles a war game, while they discuss how many soldiers a particular plan might cost. That toy soldiers are traditionally made of lead, a material of the projectiles sometimes fired by guns and rifles, links childhood, games and war, bringing the war zone into the home; and that toy soldiers are now also made of plastic completes the web of association.

Clearly, a successful soldier must give up something of his humanity, a loss that may render him outside the parameters of family life and convert family life to another kind of battleground. It is in this home-as-battleground context that, in "Statement" (*SM* 32), Duffy comments on both the warring between the Irish and the English in Ireland, and on domestic violence in general. The man is a husband, a soldier in the patriarchy rather than in the national guard, and his violence is directed toward his wife, whose "apron was a map of Ireland. He jabbed / his finger to the North," where the unrest is more intense "bruising her breast" in his anger. The

injured breast has, no doubt, fed the children of his empire in much the way that Ireland has fed those of the British Empire; and in the same way that Ireland bears the signs of Empire, so the woman bears her husband's sign of an empire at peace on her ring finger, and that of an empire at war on her breast. This may seem a particularly jaundiced depiction of heterosexual relationships, but this is an *imperialistic* relationship where might is right.

The reference to a woman's body as an actual war zone that is both exploited and violated indicates that Duffy regards violence between and against individuals as part of the same system that allows war and the domination of nations by states. The weaker nation is feminised, and the female can stand for the weaker nation, in or out of the home, just as the territory that defines the boundaries of the nation is often depicted as female. This is also evident in "Too Bad" (TOC 13), where the IRA is hitting back on behalf of the feminised Ireland: not at the nation but at an individual. The assassin is "wearing revenge like a badge on his heart", approximately the same part of the body that was the recipient of violence in the poem, "Statement". This "badge", then, represents a violation of human relationships: where he might keep an image of his beloved or his mother-Ireland, this man keeps "Hatred" for his extended nation/family that, like the family in Larkin's "Leave", has been rendered dysfunctional by war. By combining the patriarchal structure and the notion of the nation as female to portray a range of violence, Duffy ties war and violence to ordinary emotions that are not noble or admirable, and victory to physical strength that is dissociated from reason and merit.

Children are also affected by family violence. In "Sit At Peace" (TOC 9), the child is expected to remain inactive "all summer", but is unable to do so. The child

is bored, and “Sometimes / [his/her] questions [are] stray snipes over no-man’s-land, / bringing sharp hands and the order [he/she] had to obey.” This peace is unreasonable, but it is enforced by adult peace-keepers, who are ‘armed’, with hands that slap and smack. But the adults also perform a civil function in times of emergency, because “the day [the child] fell from the Parachute Tree, they came / from nowhere running,” full of concern and “carried [her/him] in to a quiet room”, enforcing a peace for which the child/casualty was “glad”. The wounded child/soldier can stay “*at peace*” for a while, enjoying the attention/glory that risks and danger can bring. Here, as with military peace-keeping (and as in the library), the enforcement is repressive, but does prevent physical injury, at least most of the time. Many other positive family values are sacrificed, however, so although family life and war have some things in common, they are too far apart to be truly compatible, and the common ground is related to the degree of dysfunction. Clearly, for Duffy, war is not an “accident” or an “abnormal” circumstance, as Larkin thought, but the extreme end of an ever-present scale of violence that invades the home.

Both poets remark on the mutual exclusiveness of positive family values, and the values and procedures of war. Larkin’s soldier in “Leave” might as well be cased in plastic, for his emotional injuries have rendered him unable to relate to his family. Larkin, however, attributes the reluctance to a fear of intimacy, of being fussed over, and of heterosexual relationships, so that the war is presented as attractive when compared with the kind of wounds that families routinely inflict. His soldier actually prefers war to family life, and as poet, Larkin does not dissociate himself from, or register disapproval of, this stance.



Larkin did not serve as this soldier did, nor did he come home from war to a family welcome and a wife. According to his idea of experience this ought to make his portrayal all the more satisfying. He falls short of the mark, however, and the strongest excuse for failing to examine the inconsistencies evident in “Leave” is that there was not a strong stance open to civilians in war time -- at least not one where their efforts might further their own beliefs and satisfy their own conscience. In “Chant”, Larkin has already noted his own paralysis:

Dreame I was walking through a field of corn  
And it was all men and women, chaind [*sic*] where they were born,  
The blades of the reaper turned in the sun  
And nothing I could do would help anyone.<sup>24</sup>

A “field” might denote fertility, for the corn appears to be growing. On closer examination, however, there is no growth, only death, so this field must symbolise a battlefield. If the “men and women” are indeed “chaind where they were born” then the field is the whole of the nation, or at least, the parts of it that Larkin identifies with. Is it *nationalistic* chains that cause them to die? If there was any indication that the reaper was also the enemy, this would be clear, but there is no enemy present. The reaper/death comes to all, but these people collude in their own destruction by remaining chained. The chains that enable the reaper’s work, disable the people in the field. Yet the people cannot throw off their chains any more than if they were really corn.

For corn plants, too, death is inevitable. They die when they are harvested or when the season comes to an end after they shed their seed to ensure the next season’s generation. This latter death is the inevitable kind: the result of old age and a life purpose fulfilled. Harvest, however, is a consequence of human activity predicated on consumption, and those who bring in the harvest may well be reapers.

To die a death like that of corn, then, is to die unnaturally to serve the ends of the consumer and the manufacturer/processor. Looked at in this way, war can be seen as an instrument of capitalism that reinforces the economic *status quo*, advantaging the wealthy and powerful by sacrificing the masses. In another unpublished (and untitled) poem there are also strong links between the corn-like deaths and those planned by “Air Marshal Death”.<sup>25</sup> In the fifth stanza of this work, Larkin shows that “Air Marshal Death” serves the military by “charting the destruction of cities”. His subaltern, “Death”, also serves the military, but from the ranks of the capitalist elite, as “the new production chief,” promulgating propaganda among the civilian populace and “allowing concerts for workers”,<sup>26</sup> where, no doubt, the masses can attend the ritual surrounding their own sacrifice.

That Larkin only hints that the Air Marshall who inspired these lines is Goering suggests that he is conscious that ordinary people on both sides are in a similar predicament, and that “Death” is in charge of production rather than destruction, reinforces the idea of capitalism as detrimental to ordinary people in general. The previous stanza, however, mentions the need to “watch that match” because the bombers know that “Where there is light there’s life.” This more specific reference to the conditions of war can hardly be intended as a warning to the enemy, so the Air Marshal must be a German planning British deaths. This ensures that the poet cannot be accused of implying that war, *per se*, is wrong, because the poem could be seen as patriotic censure of the enemy, a possibility that has been set up even earlier in the poem, when the dead poets speak from behind the glass of their shelves (again Larkin uses the image of texts as authoritative and knowing), saying “Your England / Is nameless and empty”.

This is a reference to the fact that during World War II many street signs, and most place names, were removed, so that in the event of invasion or infiltration it would be difficult for foreigners to orient themselves without giving away their ‘foreign-ness’ by speaking to ask for directions. Thus lack of local knowledge implies an outsider position that is consistent with Larkin’s rejection of the modern Coventry: if he belonged there he would not need signs and, conversely, that he does need them, confirms the foreign nature of the place (just as readers’ use of signs in the library confirms their outside status). For war-time Britons, though, it is important that the right to display place names be regained by winning the war. Failing that, the names of places might well be changed to suit German tastes, or to commemorate German victory. At worst, the English names might be lost. To some extent, this would make the British foreigners in their own country: their places would be gone even though the location of these beloved places remained, like the site of Troy, to mark an earlier centre of culture. Not to fight, and not to win, are unthinkable.

But even though Larkin has his literary heroes speak out, they do so from the sanctity of the library shelf, where violence can be contained by word and plot. *Their* lives are ordered not by war, but by letter and number. Out in the chaotic world, where repercussions cannot be so easily predicted, Larkin avoids equivocates. There is no denying that the British Air Marshal Death is doing much the same as his German counterpart: plotting German deaths and sacrificing freely the British airmen in the process. The poem, therefore, *can* also be read as a censure of war in general, because it contains little in the way of justification that would seem to outweigh the fact that this is deliberate destruction of humans. Clearly, this is not a

situation that can be seen as admirable and heroic, but one that tampers with the fabric of society in a way that could result in loss of cohesion and loss of the norms that feed group identity.

Many people lived through war and concluded, in after years, that war is destructive, but for the most part, Larkin avoids comment. Living in relative peace, however, would seem to have given Duffy more freedom to criticise war. Not only is she more unequivocally anti-war than Larkin, but she also examines issues that he ignores. For instance, in *Standing Female Nude*, there is a group of poems that could be seen as a sequence of comment on war. Instead of the potential for glory, there is a common thread of concern for humanity running through these works. The fourth poem of the group, "Missile" (*SFN* 53), could be taken merely as an account of patriarchal violence rather than a comment on war, except that it is sited between "What Price?" a poem about the modern perception of Hitler, and "Poker in the Falklands with Henry & Jim". In "Missile", Duffy calls on a commonality of all living things, "Except you, Daddy". This line forms a refrain, and each stanza evokes an important difference between "Daddy" and everything and everyone else. At the end of the first stanza, "Everything is only itself. Grows"; at the end of the second stanza, "we show no difference, we're the same"; and in the third stanza, all can cry. "Daddy" is excepted from all of these, and in the last stanza where the word "bang" is interspersed among snatches of songs that call up images of male domination and violence, everyone can die "Bang. Bang. / Except you, Daddy." This is another home-front poem, but it applies to a much wider section of life than civil or international war. As in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy", the victims here are not soldiers, are not really on different political or ethnic sides, but are nevertheless

subject to the kind of every day oppression that leaves them without a secure identity, and by the end of the poem “The cat is spider is grass / is roses is bird fish bang”. These victims of aggression can no longer separate themselves from the aggression. Like the disoriented “Woman on the Underground”, Larkin’s “Conscientious Objector” and his “Conscript”, they have no place, there is no public recognition of their suffering, and no end is envisaged. They are too confused to help themselves or each other, and, as in “Statement”, family and war violence evoke each other throughout the poem.

“Missile” can also be read as being about a nuclear war, in which plants and animals that are so severely mutated that they cannot be identified. This reading is supported by the title, but throughout the poem the focus is on the victimisation of the many by the all-powerful, but unfeeling Daddy. The title implies the launching of a phallic object, so that the reference to general family violence and to sexual abuse is clear, but especially it refers to violence by men. Whether Daddy is an actual parent within a patriarchal family, or a powerful figure *in loco parentis* over a community, the abuse of power emanates from the male position<sup>27</sup> and destroys all but the dictator/patriarch. If it is the missile itself that is “Daddy” -- the father of all weaponry -- then the prediction is for the total annihilation of life as we know it. Unlike Larkin’s “winter for evermore” in “Chant”, though, “Missile” depicts an interim stage where life continues. That this life is not in forms that we recognise could mean that the forms have lost stability, or that human cognition is reduced to an appalling level. The message constant to all readings is that it is stupid to fight, and fighting makes us stupid.

The proximity to each other of the poems that make up Duffy's 'war sequence' both strengthens their association with war and broadens the issue to include the repercussions of disinterest in war. For instance, the poem, "Borrowed Memory" (*SFN* 55), is about a couple who erroneously imagine they have done their civic duty, throughout their lives, by standing up for human rights and justice. This is followed by "Shooting Stars" (*SFN* 56), which harks back to the holocaust in a way that reminds the postwar citizen of the moral dilemma of trying to understand the suffering of others through study, or as entertainment. Part of the dilemma is tied up with the facts that a thorough understanding is out of reach, and that the processes inherent in seeking an understanding of horrific experiences can be enjoyable. "Shooting Stars" moves from the actual suffering to the version of the film or the history lesson, or perhaps the real thing is like a film or history lesson, because life goes on as before for those not directly involved. The word "Shooting" functions simultaneously as a verb and an adjective, implying both film and violence, as well as rapid movement, which signals the passage of time that cannot be recalled. The play on the word "Stars", which relates to the sign of David and to the Hollywood actor, is strengthened by the following poem, "The B Movie", which is about the way life, especially love and violence, are manipulated in film-making to give audiences what they want as entertainment. This poem implies a number of home-fronts both in terms of ethnicity, and in terms of time period: it implies that war cannot be far away while violence and domination are still with us. Instead of being organised into factions which fight over territory, however, the indiscriminate appropriation of the suffering and the history of others continues the aggression and renews the possibility for future war.

Although Larkin also associates war and social conflict (as in “Leave”), he differs in that he presents the wife, or the family, as the real enemy rather than as the victim of misdirected aggression. He separates this kind of aggression, anti-social behaviour and violence from the justifications and processes of war, by presenting it merely as a plot among women, children and fools, against men who are quite right to lash out because they have been betrayed or tricked. Larkin does this repeatedly; for example, he separates misogyny, as in “Self’s the Man”, from his realisation of his mother’s position as family “dogsbody”, and from his failure to do anything but become “irritated” by the strategies she employs to maintain her continued acceptance of her position.<sup>28</sup>

Larkin also separates the violence contained in art from strategies for domination in the physical world, upbraiding readers in “Fiction and the Reading Public” (*CP* 34) but failing to link the lust for vicarious experience through art, to the lust for information of the war. The relationship between war and the press, however, is an issue that bothers many people, and both Larkin and Duffy comment on this. There is the need to know what is happening, and there is the fear of not being told the truth in the interests of profit, or of ‘the public good’. Determining just when news presenting becomes sensationalism, and when newspaper production becomes not a public service, but merely big business, also presents an ethical dilemma. These issues bother Larkin, and in his war-works the media, or perhaps those who feed information to the media, are far from blameless. In “Chant”, Larkin is aware that papers are selling well because people are strongly motivated to read the lists of the dead for news of family and friends; and that along with these lists (and perhaps just by reading the lists), they also read and absorb the propaganda

that manipulates them to keep on fighting despite personal loss and deprivation. He writes:

Bought a paper printed on human skin  
That told the living to keep smiling and the dead to grin.<sup>29</sup>

A few people are making money, and it is these people who tell others that they are expected to smile in times of loss and uncertainty, or to grin and bear their own death. The newspaper war-list may be all those at home see of their dead loved ones, and this is another example of the loss of status of kinship, of community, of friendship and of ritual. The substitute list is not a commonality of suffering, but a commonality of falsehood. Surely, to ask people to keep smiling is tantamount to asking them to enjoy their own destruction. The demand cannot be ridiculed, however, because the paper itself is “written on human skin” showing that others have been prepared to sacrifice much more than that. Even in death their remains are not their own, and they are denied the dignity of burial in order to continue their patriotic duty. The dead provide the material for the news and represent their own sufferings which are then used to coerce the populace into smiling, in spite of their loss and living conditions, simply because they are still living. To have others give their skin while you remain safe implies a debt of gratitude that is impossible to repay. The living are, therefore, *obliged* to smile, because that is *all* they can do.

Underneath this idea is the implication that the dead did not *give* their skins, but had them appropriated, requisitioned or stolen; and in a handwritten manuscript, untitled, undated and crossed out, Larkin says:

The same columns that bless us today, tomorrow may  
Sneer that we ‘swallowed the press barons’ bait’  
It happened last time.<sup>30</sup>



That Larkin attacks the press barons may exonerate the political leaders of the country, or it might implicate them in a conspiracy to defraud the people of correct information and the chance to make informed judgments. Larkin is aware of the complexity of the dilemma, for he goes on to note that not swallowing the ‘bait’ means re-examining the actions of the enemy, and perhaps not seeing them as “the horror and tricks ... for which we condemn them”.

If the enemy is not truly evil, the British cause cannot be truly good. Larkin concludes the poem with a plea of diminished responsibility: that “we were young and confused”. This excuses the inability to separate truth from propaganda, but also implies, firstly, that, with a clear head and a mature outlook, it ought to be possible to sort out the rights and wrongs; and, secondly, that maturity brings clarity of vision. Larkin has crossed out the stanza that implied intrigue, and it is possible that such an idea did not seem permissible at that time: that it seemed disloyal. Whatever his reasons for rejecting it, however, these lines do imply that the larger systems -- the War Office, the Government -- that represent the Country/Nation and reflect it back to the people, cannot be trusted because they have their own agenda; and that the people might not agree with the priorities set by their own representatives. These implications are similar to those in Duffy’s “Army”, but Larkin is writing in wartime, when the idea that perhaps the people should not follow their leaders could well be construed as treason.

Voluntarily to go to war, for the sake of the press, when the war is somebody else’s, also brings dilemma and confusion. In Duffy’s “War Photographer” (*SFN* 51), the disjunction of moving freely and unharmed between an arena of violence and a peaceful home country presents problems for the speaker. This man believes

in what he does, that he is doing “what someone must”, but is aware that he treads on the lives of others. The photographer is trying to jog the world into action, although he knows “they do not care.” The least war correspondents can do to ensure they do not degenerate into ghoulish fascination, then, is to retain an empathy for the victims of war by remembering that whether or not people are members of the same immediate cultural group, they are all part of a humanity that depends for definition on similarity rather than on difference. The photographer may have laudable motives, but he knows he is at the mercy of his editor who will select only “five or six” from his “hundred agonies in black-and-white”, causing readers, very temporarily “between the bath and pre-lunch beers”, to experience a sense of the destruction. But they move easily back into their own lives without doing anything to improve the situation, and this is good for business. The business of the press is to sell papers, and the photographer is uncomfortable that he is part of the propaganda machine and that his material can be used to serve other agendas. Duffy’s photographer is more aware of his position than Larkin and his soldier are of theirs. The photographer is less self-centred, but is much more centred on himself in terms of his moral and ethical orientation than the soldier: although he does, quite literally, act as the seeing eye, he refrains from becoming the all-seeing ‘I’ (a stance that allowed Larkin to adopt an attitude of superiority and detachment from which to decry what is ‘done to’ him) because he is aware that what he does is important.

Perhaps Larkin had some grounds for feelings of superiority. In his writing, particularly in his unpublished poems, there are snippets that indicate that even while the Second World War was in progress he realised the hypocrisy of Britain’s situation. In these writings he sometimes deplores the horrors of war, and there are

hints that these outweigh the value he places on nationalism or its attendant idea of British superiority. Certainly, Larkin separated himself from nationalistic fervour and maintained a degree of doubt in the propaganda machine. The inability to distinguish fact from propaganda makes citizens the pawns of a state that uses rather than serves them. But to see one's own situation in such a light is likely to make the burdens of living in times of war unbearable. That the destruction has happened as the result of definite human action makes the feeling of helplessness to stop the process more poignant, because an action that is deliberate ought to be able to be countered. But the idea that the alternative to fighting was the total loss of British culture clouds the issue, and Larkin can gain nothing useful by pursuing this line of thought.

Larkin can see no way out. In the final stanza of "Chant", the world is "dead as a petrified tree". Nothing but the sea moved, and "All was winter for evermore." Perhaps Larkin envisages everyone as dead, or perhaps he is unable to project beyond war's end, to a continuing society that differs from his own. There is evidence that Larkin did give the matter thought, because in "A Member of the 1922 Class Looks to the Future",<sup>31</sup> he speculates that all will be rosy after the war. Enemies will be friends again, and industrial strikes and the class system will all be in the past. The loveliness of it all, he says "Makes my eyes fill with tears". Clearly Larkin is applying heavy sarcasm here, so this example of personal involvement with change does little to balance the many times he distances himself from the war, and from change in general. This distancing is also evident in his observations of the "reaper" in the "cornfield": despite the appreciation of the loss

and the feelings of helplessness, he does not actually include himself among those about to be cut down.

This process is for other people, and unlike Duffy's war-photographer, who is, quite literally the seeing eye, Larkin's role is to be the seeing I/eye that not only sees, but understands the overall state of play. Although he cannot help anyone, Larkin is at least free to contemplate that help is needed. This suggests an analogy to his position *vis à vis* the war. Larkin's sensation of helplessness has led (or perhaps forced) him to return, via the thought of "winter evermore", to the idea that Britain must fight or that which he sees as his whole world will be destroyed: that is to say, what is most feared is that the effects of not fighting will be so catastrophic that an outcome can be anticipated with fear, but not understood or described. Because this is beyond the imagination, all that can be predicted is that there will be chaos and an end to society as the British know it.

Larkin seems to regard much of this as unthinkable, and his work implies some rather confused and mutually exclusive ideas. Firstly, there is the suggestion that the wages of war are death, and that war is a sin because the wages of sin are also death. Although Larkin is not a Christian, he is the product of a Christian society, and the idea that the Empire's actions were synonymous with God's will was not uncommon. War does demand the suspension of some of the Ten Commandments, and appears inconsistent with both commandments documented in the New Testament as given by Jesus, but there is plenty of Biblical precedent for going to war. A dogma that both forbids and allows killing cannot avoid being fraught with troublesome inconsistencies. Secondly, there is the implication that, because these people are innocent, and because death is the inevitable result of life,

God is the reaper. Thirdly, if death itself is the real enemy, perhaps the people should stop fighting and find ways to lengthen the chains that make them sitting ducks for the premature death brought about by war.

This is the very idea that makes the poem about “Air Marshal Death” and the “press barons”, potentially most subversive, and underscores the need for an assertion that “we were young and confused” and, therefore, not responsible. And that, in “Chant”, Larkin was unable to posit an alternative lifestyle that he and his country-people might have followed if they had lost the war, indicates that his is a vision not just of the destruction of British cultural patterns, but of the total destruction of human civilisation. This might imply that the only real kind of civilisation is that of the British. Anything else is a kind of death. It is convenient, then, that because it is tainted by confusion and lack of maturity, Larkin need not examine or resolve his mixture of subversive and extreme right wing attitudes, because his own tactic of treating others as if he were their librarian would also be open to question.

The fears expressed by Duffy, writing with the knowledge that the war did end, and that society did continue, are more narrowly circumscribed, but in “Letters from Deadmen” (*SFN* 62), she demonstrates that the influence of loved ones, heroes and autocrats is by no means over just because they are dead. Deaths must be commemorated and remembered, and one result of this is that the influence of the dead person lives on. In the poem the living wife and child are exhorted by the dead one, via grief, or perhaps via duty or habit, first to “Observe my anniversary, / place purple violets tenderly before the urn. You must.” This is not just a polite request. But an annual tribute will allow some forgetting to take place; so as a constant

reminder, they are told to “leave my room / exactly as it was”. Lastly, as if their own continued existence were not enough, they are told to “remember me. / [and] Give me biography / beyond these simple dates.” This man is prepared to have his family provide a living memorial to his life, and although he enquires whether there were “psalms and hired limousines” at his funeral, he offers little in the way of comfort for those he loved, and whose lives he still orders. Even if this poem is taken as containing four different voices, from four dead men, it is still clear that each seeks to influence the earthly world after his demise. Their power to do so exists as a shadow or residue of their influence remaining in the feelings and conditioning of the living relatives and friends (and, perhaps, enemies). Grief is confusing, because the need for ritual and remembrance, although it is internal (having origins in grief and the human psyche), is also felt as external (as the demands of social, religious or cultural practices) and perhaps as oppressive. When commemoration is a compulsion, it causes the re-enacting of the loss in a way that prevents a return to normal life, and makes the embracing of developmental changes seem like acts of disloyalty.

The bereaved persons in Duffy’s poem do at least have well established sets of ritual that they may apply to assuage their grief. Survivors of war, however, may be deprived of sight of the body and/or of a part in the funeral, and may be left with only public memorial services and lists in newspapers, around which they must build their own cathartic procedures. Established bereavement rituals, like many peacetime structures, become destabilised by war. In every case, even for those who do have access to traditional funeral ceremonies, the proximity of the death is uncomfortably close to their own possible demise as a casualty of war, and this also

has a destabilising effect by reminding mourners they no longer have the expectation of a relatively predictable future.

The uncertainty is compounded by the knowledge that censorship is practiced by ‘them’ at the top, and all this ensures that the present is only visible in the narrowest sense, so that the immediate past is also something of a mystery. This element of mystery gives some individuals the power to be ‘in the know’: even those facts associated with quite ordinary matters become privileged information, which, because it is censored, seems more official and therefore more authoritative. Because information is rationed, it cannot be verified; and bogus claims to know cannot be exposed. Larkin’s suspicion regarding the ‘press barons’ relates to the fact that they are in a position to manipulate people in order to make more profit, but the government and the military might be in a position to manipulate the press, and no-one can ascertain the truth of the matter. What is clear is that the war is related to both local and national economic structures, so that their relationship to the war is tainted with possibilities for, at best, insoluble dilemma, and at worst, ruthless exploitation. Larkin does not explore this in his early work; but in a later poem, “Homage to a Government” (*CP* 171), he sets up a contrast between doing the right thing, and saving money. He certainly is concerned about the national image, and points his irony with the recurring phrase “and it is all right” in contexts that clearly indicate he thinks that it is all quite wrong. This censure includes acts such as making decisions on economic grounds; leaving places unprotected; and dismissing what is happening because it is far away. “Our children will not know it’s a different country”, he says, and this difference is an honour that is diminished by failure to fulfil a military/social duty. This all seems very altruistic. But there is no

mention that the “Places they guarded, or kept orderly” might be inhabited. People who might suffer from a resurgence of violence do not rate a mention, and the following poem, “When the Russian tanks roll westward” (*CP* 172), although not entirely serious, indicates the true nature of the concern. His question “what defence for you and me?” places peace-keeping activities in a perspective that reveals he is more concerned to keep violence at a distance than he is about any pacifist or humanitarian leanings; and the humour functions to dissociate him from any obvious connection with what might be deemed unethical overtones. In “Homage to a Government”, then, war and economics are related; but it is fear for personal safety that gives rise to his concern for “lack of money”, and loss of national glory that makes the country the children will inherit “different”.

Duffy makes a stronger connection between money and war in her poem, “What Price?” (*SFN* 52), written during a (brief) time when documents purporting to be Hitler’s diaries were thought to be authentic. This poem ties in very nicely with the kind of comments Larkin recollected his father making.<sup>32</sup> Sydney Larkin has been suspected of fascist leanings, and he did travel to Germany to attend the Nuremberg rallies prior to the start of the Second World War. But that many of the ideas he expressed had a much wider following than might be expected is evident in “What Price?”. The speaker, who has already partially exonerated Hitler in his own mind by asserting that he “saw some sense / in what he tried to do,” has the diaries, and although he “admit[s] that it was hell to be a Jew”, immediately goes on to wonder “how much / do you think they’ll fetch? One million? Two?” Duffy cuts through peripheral issues that motivate people to excuse atrocity, and points out that



the real reason for the fighting was economic. Economics and the lust for power still rule the memories of war, and negate the anti-war messages of the suffering.

In “Making Money” (*TOC* 17), Duffy turns this image around, but again asserts the connection between living in a capitalist system and violence. “[*M*]aking a living”, she says, “*is making a killing these days*” and she links this to the destruction of forests, and, later in the poem, to both war and peace, in a description of the macabre practice of spent shell collecting:

Bergarma. The boys from the bazaar  
hide on the target-range, watching the soldiers fire. Between bursts,  
they rush for the spent shells, cart them away for scrap.  
Here is the catch. Some shells don’t explode. Ahmat  
runs over grass, lucky for six months, so far. So  
bomb collectors die young. But the money’s good.

Later in the poem “The economy booms / like cannon,” disguising the danger and disowning the price of the boom: the destruction of its own citizens. There is a similar system in operation in “Money Talks” (*SM* 33), where the speaker has an extraordinary amount of power for one individual. He boasts of his virility, his wealth and his influence, but he is aware that he rules with fear because he concludes by saying “I am / the big bombs, sighing in their thick lead sheaths OK”, showing that virility, violence and money are all linked. The use of the dollar sign in place of the letter ‘s’ occurs twice in the poem, and this implies that the wealthy bully is American, or, more specifically, America; but it is money itself that is a “jealous God”. Duffy knows that war is about power, and that money is a kind of power that assists its possessor in domination *over* others. Again, too, the phallic is evoked by the language that describes the materials of war, linking mass destruction to patriarchal domination and family violence. Clearly, Duffy sees war as purely destructive, with no phoenix to make the sacrifice worthwhile. In this sense, her

portrayal of war *is* more satisfying than Larkin's, and this is partly because she is able to take a stand.

But for Larkin there is no tenable stand. Even refraining, as he does, from writing of national glory, praise or thanks for the sacrifice of those who died or suffered constitutes, in a sense, a rejection of the salvation from certain German domination. Thus for him victory cannot be celebrated in a straightforward way any more than war can be straightforwardly abhorred or acclaimed, and his cynicism implies that at some level of consciousness, he was not completely convinced it was all worthwhile. In addition, there is the apathy Larkin mentions in his recollections of Oxford, as well as a considerable amount of confusion (resulting from the lack of trust in the media and war authorities, and from a consequent inability to clarify and define) that prevents him from forming valid and stable structures on which he might have based coherent and satisfying war poems. "Leave" ends with war as an attractive alternative to marriage; "Chant" ends with annihilation; "A Member of the 1922 Class Looks to the Future" ends with tears; "A Democrat Looks to the Future" ends with England enslaved; and "It is nearly eleven o'clock" ends with confusion. That Larkin is unable to clarify his own ideas supports the assertion that he regarded aesthetic rather than empathetic processes as the stuff from which poetry could be crafted. Like the Romantics, Larkin relies on only a certain kind of experience that seems to transcend the real world. This transcendence is predicated in a particular way of seeing that leaves the process open to corruption from vested interest. Larkin's tendency to colonise experience in a general way constitutes the basis of his reputation as spokesman for the ordinary person, and indicates a degree of trust that must have made rigorous examination of his work impossible. It is

highly likely that this is the main reason that the absence of war poetry has seldom occasioned public comment.

Portraying fallen comrades as brave, true and admirable or as victims of the state, deceived, powerless and wasting their lives, like the mindless cornstalks of the dream, helps combat the feelings of loss and futility that war engenders. But war heroes are not all that is missing from Larkin's work. At no time does he call on a commonality or mutuality of home front experience between poet and reader. He cannot have been untouched, yet seems to have behaved as if this were the case.

Given her historical placement, and her general willingness for self-re-examination, that Duffy approaches war from a more liberal point of view than Larkin is predictable, but her portrayal of war as just one kind of violence among many is remarkable. She depicts war as associated with the architectonics of the patriarchy and capitalism, and as inside the moral and ethical zones that must be negotiated in community and family life. In addition, she has recognised the destabilising effect of violence on cultural values and she has responded in her work by presenting violence as incorporated into culture: not as something that is desirable, but as something that exists. This strategy allows her to distance herself from a covert endorsement of violence without disruption to her cultural identity, so that she presents a view of the personal sacrifice demanded of participants in a way that leaves the reader in no doubt that she sees no redeeming quality in the processes or the consequences of war, and in no doubt that she is secure in her belonging to her community. Her poem, "Army", is undoubtedly a pacifist poem, whereas Larkin's "Leave" and "Chant" are only ambivalently anti-war and do not interrogate the double-ness. Thus Larkin has kept violence relegated to an 'outside' in a way that

leaves both the sphere of his culture and the values he believes are just and consistent, untouched and unexamined. This has worked well throughout the ages, but only for those who adopt war as a valid method of conducting international relations, and at the expense of those killed, maimed and bereaved. Instead of working to find other ways to maintain his national and cultural identity without compromising his ideals Larkin turns his back on the insight his wartime confusion might afford, and uses the same processes that he doubts in wartime to justify his various and often contradictory views in later life. Duffy openly acknowledges that war, and the suffering it brings, must either be seen as worthwhile, or else abandoned as a political strategy, and works to expose the extent of unacknowledged suffering that all violence brings. With this attitude, it should not be possible for her to avoid self-knowledge by clinging to the past, as Larkin has done.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, in an unpublished, undated poem ("A Democrat to Others") held in the Brynmor Jones Library, Hull, Catalogue number DPL 14u.

<sup>2</sup> *Life* (32). This drawing is called "Portrait of the Author and Family". Motion quotes Mr Larkin's speech bubble as: "The British government have started this war... Hitler had done all he could for peace... Well, all I hope is that we get smashed to Hades...our army is useless. ARP? Ha, Ha! This is the end of civilization... after all, man has to be superseded sooner or later... we're only a stage in the earth's development... very unimportant stage, too..." Philip Larkin has depicted himself blushing, and with an exclamation mark over his head in place of a speech bubble. This drawing also appears on the inside cover of the hard-cover edition of *Letters*.

<sup>3</sup> Larkin, DPLg, "The seventh collection being poems by philip larkin july 1942" [*sic*]. "Leave" is poem number VII.

<sup>4</sup> *RW*, 159.

<sup>5</sup> *RW*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> *RW*, 159. Given that Hopkins was a very able poet, I see no reason to concur with this judgement. In effect, Larkin writes against the grain of his own more autobiographical poems ("The Dance", "Aubade" and many others) by blithely dismissing (someone else's) experience of war, revealing that it was not experience *per se* that he regarded as the material for poetry, but only a certain set of experiences he could treat as typical, or timeless.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Sinfield (1989, 10) says that working class people were not materially worse off during the war, because they had been living a life of deprivation before the war. Duffy and Larkin may, therefore, differ in their perception of the degree of deprivation caused by rationing because of differing class affiliation.

<sup>8</sup> C. C. Eldridge (1996) says The Falklands War was "a virtual re-run of one of the 'little wars' of Queen Victoria's reign -- the colonial crisis overseas, the hurried dispatch of an expeditionary force, the British public agog for news, the same 'John Bull spirit', the jingoistic press,

the cheering crowds on the return of the troops, the award of medals, the victory parades and services of thanksgiving. As economic and social problems at home were temporarily swept aside, the Thatcher government enjoyed an election victory reminiscent of the 'Khaki election' of 1900. Finally, the war was followed by the traditional rushing into print as publishers, journalists, popular writers and the visual artists of the 1980s sought to profit from the British public's seemingly unquenchable thirst for information and titillation." (12)

<sup>9</sup> C. C. Eldridge (1996), says that "waves of imperial nostalgia" have "tended to surface at times of crisis", and he cites the Falklands and Gulf wars as "obvious examples". (12)

<sup>10</sup> *RW*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> *RW*, 159.

<sup>12</sup> *Life*. The word 'racism' appears in the index, under 'Philip Larkin, attitudes and opinions'.

<sup>13</sup> Larkin, DPL 15ac.

<sup>14</sup> Larkin, DPL 30a.

<sup>15</sup> "On the night of 14 November 1940, nearly one-third of all homes were rendered uninhabitable in Coventry." (Alan Sinfield, 1989. 7)

<sup>16</sup> Pamela Shurmer-Smith, and Kevin Hannam, in their book *Worlds of Desire, Realms of Power: A Cultural Geography* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994) differentiate between place and location. Place, they say, exists only in the mind of the experiencer, and is not constant. What is constant is location. The example given is that of Troy. The place no longer exists, but the location or site continues to exist.

<sup>17</sup> Larkin, DPL 13c, a typed booklet with handwritten annotations dated June 1940. The date given for the completion of "Conscript" in the *CP* is 1941, indicating that there is a later revision.

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that Larkin has made a mistake here, because stalactites hang from the roof of caves, and to fall among them may pose some difficulty. Stalagmites, however, rise up from the cave floor, resembling spikes, and some are very sharp.

<sup>19</sup> Larkin, DPL 23. Also quoted in *Life*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Larkin, DPL 14q.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Sinfield (1989). Sinfield references Raynes Minns' *Bombers and Mash* (London : Virago, 1980), 184.

<sup>22</sup> Larkin, DPL g.

<sup>23</sup> Duffy, *Fleshweathercock and Other Poems* (Walton-on -Thames, Surrey: Outpost Publications, 1973), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Larkin, DPL 14q.

<sup>25</sup> Larkin, DPL 14an.

<sup>26</sup> Larkin, untitled. DPL 14an.

<sup>27</sup> Women can also assume this position by taking on the role of enforcer of patriarchal power structures.

<sup>28</sup> *Life*, 50-51.

<sup>29</sup> Larkin, DPL 14q.

<sup>30</sup> Larkin, DPL 14an.

<sup>31</sup> Larkin, DPL 14u.

<sup>32</sup> See note 2.

## Conclusion

It is possible and useful to examine the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy and Philip Larkin under the overarching paradigm of imperialism. Larkin is an isolationist who wants to draw explicit borders and shun any move towards structures of inclusion or globalism: on the contrary, he speaks of himself as withdrawing, like a snail, so that his borders are shrunk to the minimum of primary locations of home. In this he emulates early-twentieth century imperialist practices, when loss of empire was a new phenomenon that seemed unimportant to the ordinary Briton, and mid-twentieth century ideas (that were voiced by Enoch Powell, for one) that the empire was never important to Britain. In line with more recent trends towards globalisation in general, and the Europeanisation of Britain in particular, Duffy redefines the inside, the criteria for belonging to a primary territory, in ways that embrace the outside through a set of values based on ideals that can accommodate a variety of difference that would have been intolerable to Larkin. She seeks to widen the British mainstream to include a liberal degree of hybridity and difference as a legitimate part of a national culture that is defined and coheres through the self-identity of its individual members. She gives voice to the outsider, but also to the insider, and although the insider is often compelled to reveal to the reader the oppressiveness necessary to the maintenance of that position, she allows all to reveal their double standards so that neither outsider nor insider is glorified or idealised. This must surely represent a positive attempt at honesty: as Duffy

depicts only momentary transcendence, so she may achieve only moments of honesty, and it remains to be seen whether it is humanly possible to achieve more than this. Whether the implied humanisms of Duffy's work are inviolable truths also remains to be seen.

Duffy's insight is not based on her intellect and studies alone. She is well aware of the importance of the need for integration of the emotional and the mental selves with the intellectual and artistic selves. To this end she employs the semiotic in ways that, it would seem, did not occur to Larkin, and questions the exclusiveness of high Art much more minutely than he has done. She does not demonstrate the need to chart the globe or the life of others in ways that enhance her own position, but instead attempts to observe, empathise and give voice, moving into the space of others in a way that indicates a willingness to negotiate rather than a will to possess. Again, it remains to be seen whether her latent adherence to mainstream religion will prevent or complicate the continuation of this process.

If we look to America for an example of contemporary imperialist practices which follow a period of isolationist policies, it is evident that although starting out with a benign, parental involvement in world affairs (an idealistic rather than a practical position), what has happened since is more insidious: what seemed to be a watching and peace-keeping brief is actually interventionist and warlike. Under the guise of international covenants, America is a prime mover in the action against political regimes within borders of other countries, not in order to take over that territory, it is true, but the motives do not always seem to be purely humanitarian and the action does not always appear to be based on wisdom. At a later date, it may be necessary to re-

examine Duffy's poetry in this light, if only because we are all tainted by the systems we critique.

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But however effective or inadequate Duffy's attempts to value tolerance may prove in the future, they are against the grain of Larkin's view that British (and, in particular, English) culture is founded on an essence that is unique and forms a standard that defines not only what he wants to be, but all that is worth being. The traditional is predicated on a past that must be denied, forgotten, or at least given a new and less authoritative place in the minds and hearts of those whose identity it governs, if change is to succeed. But Larkin is not prepared to give up any of the past, so that rather than being in control of his own present and future, he seeks to control and preserve the past as a way of negating change.

This is further complicated because he cannot believe in the structures that give the most ready access to British identity: he loves Anglican ritual but cannot accept the tenets of Christianity; he believes in the home as castle but rejects the associated implications of marriage and family; he wants national glory, but rejects the foreign that is inherent in the practicality of Empire; he rejects classical myth, possibly because it is un-English, but fails to realise that myths of Empire are continually being rewritten; he rejects the authority of the formally composed written word, insisting on the vernacular, but keeps that vernacular under tight, canonical rein; and he is against war but retains a belief in the rightness of British military intervention overseas and in the two world



wars, as well as a willingness to associate sex and violence. The more Larkin tries to site his cultural identity within England, the more he acknowledges the greater Empire from which he seeks to dissociate himself, so that while he is committed to its preservation, he cannot live in this past that he defends with his life's work. Thus his life and work are characterised by ambivalence that, for the most part, he cannot afford to recognise because to do so would be to compromise his own goal.

His solution is to rely on text as a basis of the unchanging that can lend stability to life, and he carries this too far when he emulates the imperialistic practices of his nation by rendering all to archive in order to use this as a means of control and a site of authority. The results are evident in his lack of self-knowledge, his inability to make important life-choices, his adopted position of philistinism and misanthropy, his unhappiness, and his long periods of writer's block. Historical factors of his own time facilitate this stance, in particular that he lives in an intellectual climate that values data and regards knowledge as a result of data gathering, and where there is a lack of awareness of both the power and the limitations of the systems by which data may be turned into knowledge, as well as the intuitive nature of wisdom.

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Larkin and Duffy have both been hailed as the voice of the same nation; yet, as speakers, they are quite different. And since their nation includes voices even more diverse than theirs, such terms are empty rhetoric: no one person can represent such a nation. In retrospect, however, it would seem that Larkin represents, and speaks loudest

to, a very specific part of that nation: that part that is like himself, white, male, educated and relatively conservative. It remains to be seen whether Duffy's wider view of society will protect her work from similar accusations in the future. After all, she is female, gay, a mother, and of mixed British descent, so that she already embodies a range of elements that Larkin would have considered to be characteristic of the outside. This may mean that those who identify closely with Larkin's work may be unable to identify with the work of Duffy. This begs the question: could the white, male, middle-class, conservative citizen be silenced or shouted out by her discourse of tolerance? Historically, this would seem to be unlikely. In addition, much of Duffy's work is open-ended in that there is no way of knowing how to classify the speaker in terms of gender or class. This is especially evident in her love poems, and perhaps this relates to her own experience and transition from life as a heterosexual to life as a gay.

Larkin and Duffy both value experience and base their art on this, but Larkin is most influenced by what happens to him on his own "internal stage". Even as a mature adult he sits back, waiting for life to happen to him. In contrast, Duffy is interested in the people that Larkin sought to hide from, both in terms of his personal life and his work. For him, shyness is a guise that may well be assumed: his self-consciousness and concern about his public image is second only to his fear of marriage, and it is clear that what he wanted was to be discovered by the world in spite of his efforts at staying hidden away. This may be his greatest ambivalence of all.

In spite of their diametrically opposed views, however, both poets share a British background that is identifiable to the non-British reader, and both have important mutual concerns of cultural identity and social function, of which economic concerns is

fast becoming a significant part (both have written about money). Duffy's overall solution of nationality as self-identity seems to be more appropriate to her time than Larkin's attempts to preserve the past seem to his, although his strategies are in keeping with the kind of enforced patriotism that is engendered by empire and war. Nevertheless, within this bid to cling to the past Larkin has innovated, stretching artistic borders even while retrenching those of time and place, and Duffy owes an artistic and social debt to his insistence on the vernacular, to his poeticising of the ordinary, and especially to his refusal to conform to what was, in his day, considered his proper social duty.

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